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Version: Version of Record

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**Second language learning at a distance: metacognition, affect,
learning strategies and learner support in relation to the
development of autonomy**

Volume 2: Submitted publications

**Articles and chapters submitted in fulfilment of the regulations for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy by published work**

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Date of submission: April 2008

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* submitted for the RAE 2008

PUBLICATION ONE

Hurd, S. (1998a) Too carefully led or too carelessly left alone? *Language Learning Journal* 17, 70-74. ISSN 0957 1736.

“Too carefully led or too carelessly left alone”?

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INTRODUCTION

The growth in numbers in higher education over the last few years and the subsequent change in student profile to incorporate more mature students have resulted in a greater recognition of differing motivations and aspirations and an increasing emphasis on notions of learner diversity and learner choice. The impact of these changes has been felt across the board, but particularly in language departments where it is generally agreed that students learn best in small groups. A common response to the requirement to ‘do more for less’ has been the introduction of self-access elements into new or existing courses, particularly on institution-wide language programmes, and, in some cases, on degree programmes as well. Autonomous learning as an integral part of taught programmes has become an increasingly popular option for language departments eager to maximise their diminishing resources.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY AUTONOMY?

The many implications of a shift towards autonomy underline the need for a clear consensus of what it actually means and how it can impact on the teaching and learning process. While theorists hold differing views on the interpretation of autonomy in relation to learning, there seems to be general agreement over one crucial point, the central role of the teacher in the autonomous learning process. Little (1991, 4), along with many others writing in this field, talks of autonomy in terms of a ‘capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action’. This is unlikely to be effectively realised without teacher intervention and guidance and can manifest itself in a number of different ways. Holec (1981, 3) goes a great deal further. Not only is autonomy a capacity, but it is also ‘the ability to take charge of one’s learning’

which is a skill ‘to be acquired by ‘natural’ means or in a systematic, deliberate way.’ Holec puts learners clearly and unambiguously at the centre of their own learning. They alone are responsible for deciding what is to be learned, when, how, in what order and by what means. It is also their responsibility to set their own goals and measure the degree to which they have been effective in attaining them. This is the extreme end of learner autonomy. Holec (1985, 189) is interested primarily in adapting the teaching to the learner and not the learner to the teaching, but is against any notion of imposition of teaching or learning method or approach, seeing it as a ‘contradiction in educational terms.’ In other words, you cannot compel people to be autonomous, if at the same time you wish to maintain notions of choice and freedom in learning, and a recognition of the diversity of learners’ needs and abilities. Holec does not, however, find the teacher’s role redundant, even if his or her presence is not, in itself, a reliable standard by which to evaluate the degree to which a learner is autonomous. It is the teacher’s responsibility to help learners achieve that state of independence, to act as counsellor, helper and facilitator, while recognising that as learner expertise increases, teacher involvement inevitably decreases.

Autonomous learning does not, therefore, imply a situation in which anything goes, nor one of total detachment which, as Little (1991, 5) points out, is a ‘principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism.’ It is not simply a matter of teachers setting up tasks and from then on ignoring their students until assessment time. Self-access packages or open learning programmes say nothing about autonomy in themselves. Indeed many are successfully used in a classroom context. It is what the learner brings to the learning process and the learning materials which not only determines his or her degree of autonomy, but is also often a measure of learning success. The ‘capacity’ to learn autonomously develops from a state of self-awareness and willingness to take an active part. In order for learners to

“This is unlikely to be effectively realised without teacher intervention”

achieve this state, teachers must also play their part. It is no easy option for either side.

HOW DO TEACHERS UNDERSTAND AUTONOMY IN TERMS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE?

A study at a new university in 1994 revealed differing interpretations of autonomy and its role in the teaching and learning process. A difficulty arose when attempting to determine its limits and possibilities and relate them to practical situations. While some talked of autonomy in the same terms as Holec or Little as a capacity for self-direction or an ability to take charge, others saw it more in the context of self-access packages linked to class-work, with clear instructions for use. Tutors were not agreed on whether autonomous language learning entailed working on your own exclusively, or whether it could be extended to working in groups independently of the teacher.

Most of the respondents talked about the kind of autonomous learning that takes place in a designated centre, as opposed to project work or homework which can usually take place anywhere. It was this type of learning, referred to as 'directed' independent learning that required a significant input from tutors in terms of setting it up, monitoring its use and assessing its value. Additional tasks of inducting students into how to make best use of the facilities, getting feedback and dealing with problems all contributed to demands on time, which for many were seen as unrealistic. Getting the message over to students that this was a requirement and not an optional extra was a particularly acute problem. Assessment was considered by some to be the most effective way of getting students to do the work, given their predominantly instrumental attitude to learning.

The view of some that it is only those at more advanced levels who can really benefit is not uncommon and is generally based on the idea that the more language learning you do, the better you become at learning, that the process of learning a language is intrinsically bound up with the process of learning to learn. The research carried out by Rowsell and Libben (1994, 681) looked at the learning behaviour of high and low achievers on autonomous language learning schemes to ascertain what distinguished them, and concluded that 'it is the learners' approach to the meaningful use of language rather than their approach to the organisation of pedagogical tasks that distinguishes between high and low achievement.' While they were able to produce evidence to show that high achievers make better independent learners, it does not follow that *ab initio* students do not, given the right support. High achievers will all have been beginners in the language originally. Those at lower levels may need more initial help and guidance but

there was no evidence to show that they achieved lower results within their thresholds than advanced learners.

Advantages for the learner centred around the availability of a wide range of language materials to access through different media, choice and the opportunity to concentrate on areas of weakness in a non-threatening environment. This was also seen to be more satisfying and empowering. In reality, those on a programme with an autonomous learning element have more limited choice than those who can simply 'use' their Centre in whatever way suits them best. Nevertheless, these students who are, paradoxically, compelled to work autonomously and consequently have to find ways of coping, are more likely to develop effective language learning strategies in order to complete their independent tasks in the time available. It was felt that unfocused autonomy was likely to lead to a great deal of time-wasting and frustrated effort, but the general view was that, provided the necessary support structures are in place, there are few, if any disadvantages for learners.

For teachers, too, there was much to gain. On the practical side, pooling of resources and ideas and collaboration over the development of materials could lead to a more stimulating and rewarding working environment, a gradual reduction in work load as more and more materials became available and a more equal and satisfying relationship with students. On the minus side, autonomous learning was difficult to manage and monitor, and enormously time-consuming.

There was general agreement on the urgent need for staff development and learner training. These were seen to be of paramount importance as the key factors in successful autonomous learning. This bears out the research findings of psychologists Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) and educationists with a particular interest in autonomous learning – Davies (1987), Gathercole (1990), Dickinson (1992), Little (1991) and Holec (1985) – that students need help initially in acquiring the necessary skills if they are to make any headway in autonomous mode,

'Learner training aims to provide learners with the alternatives from which they can make informed choices about *what, why, how, when* and *where* they learn. This is not to say they *have* to make all these decisions all of the time.' (Dickinson 1992, 13)

Nevertheless, it was considered very important that learners be made to recognise their responsibilities and not encouraged to think that autonomous language learning could be interpreted as opting out if you felt like it. A designated member of staff for each language was suggested as an important stage in implementing an effective autonomous language learning programme. He or she would have the dual function of helping students and feeding back to

**"unfocused
autonomy was
likely to lead to a
great deal of
time-wasting"**

languages staff. In order to train learners, teachers also needed training,

'In a system where the learner assumes responsibility for his learning whilst still learning how to do so, where the teaching is centred on giving support to the learner, the teacher himself must also redefine his role by reference to this focusing on the learner and his learning.' (Holec 1981, 24)

However, the likelihood of adequate staff development and learner training taking place was seen to be minimal. Staff could not be forced to attend training sessions. These would therefore inevitably become sessions where presenter periodically preached to the converted. Training in the use of technology was also set to remain piecemeal and fragmentary, owing to constraints on time and budgets. Depressingly, it was likely to remain the case that a few enthusiasts would attempt against all odds, to keep the issues alive and hope gradually to persuade unconvinced staff of the benefits, through informal discussion, demonstration of good practice and increased participation in research projects.

PITFALLS AND POSSIBILITIES

There are reasonable grounds to believe that, given time, institutional support, adequate resourcing and staff development, autonomous language learning as part of a taught programme can have many distinct advantages for both the teacher and learner. Nevertheless, it would seem that, realistically, only a partial autonomy can be exercised by students in a university context, precisely because the goals and objectives are already in place before a student enrolls. Given the diversity of students' aspirations, needs and abilities, the variety of learning styles and the range of personal expectations, this is no bad thing. A degree of autonomy is certainly desirable. However, that same diversity dictates that total autonomy would be counter-productive for many students, in particular those who are unused or unwilling to self-direct in other areas of their lives and those who find it stressful, if not impossible, to relinquish the role of passive recipient in the teaching and learning process. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991, 5) remind us that while most teachers would no longer support the idea of teacher as "fountain of expert knowledge" and "learner as recipient of teacher's wisdom", there is a danger in adopting an over-permissive approach to learning. They cite Rogers whose writings 'give form to the belief that the right psychological conditions will produce a flowering of the individual', but highlight the dangers: 'A diffuse concern for the learner arising perhaps out of a mixed-up sentimentality does not generate these conditions; neither does the *laissez-faire* approach created when people think they can go along with these ideas without fully

understanding them.' They see learning as a skill which can itself be learned and that leaving students entirely to their own devices to 'discover' is doing them a gross disservice.

On a practical level, language teachers need to target those areas of language learning which are particularly suitable for an autonomous approach. There is a general consensus around the suitability of autonomous learning packages for remedial grammar work to enable students having difficulty over a specific language point to work at their own pace and repeat as often as necessary. Pronunciation and intonation practice through imitating models of good practice is also an appropriate activity for outside the classroom. The effectiveness of autonomous learning for receptive tasks also tends to meet with general acceptance. One of the strengths of a Resource Centre is the variety of materials it can house that are suitable for reading and listening activities. There is, however, a pressing need for research to be carried out to determine how much 'new' learning students can cope with on their own. Randall and Scott (1992, 361) were unable to conclude from their survey of university students on a 1st-semester French course whether it was possible to learn and apply grammar rules on your own. What they did discover, however, was that students showed 'a marked inability to read and learn linguistic structures which are formed with function words,' for example relative pronouns. A much higher rate of success was demonstrated in tests using "content-based" linguistic structures, such as *ne...personne*. They concluded that teachers need to 'begin by identifying linguistic structures in terms of their function or content' and 'designate the linguistic structures which can be learned outside the class'.

Preparation for or follow-up to classroom work is considered by many to be an appropriate activity for students to tackle on their own. However, if it is not to be indistinguishable from 'set homework' the degree of autonomy needs to be clearly understood. For example, asking students to watch the news in the target language and prepare a résumé of a news item of their choice involves some autonomy; stating which news item to watch and exactly what to do with it does not. In the same way, directing students to a particular self-correcting language learning package is not asking them to exercise autonomy, merely to follow instructions. On the other hand, giving out information on the range of materials available and help in how to get the most from them is undoubtedly encouraging students to act autonomously. It is breaking what Riley (1976, 79) has called the 'addiction' to classes, needing the weekly 'fix' of the language. He maintains that "any activity which can be done inside a classroom with a teacher can be done outside without one" (Riley, 1976, 88). Nevertheless, if learners are not trained for autonomy, no amount of surrounding them with resources will foster in them that capacity for active involvement and conscious choice,

"the degree of autonomy needs to be clearly understood"

although it might appear to do so. Much has been written on the subject of learner training, of particular note, Oxford's SILL, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (1989), Wenden's action plan for strategies (1991), Rubin and Wenden's advice on how to be a successful language learner (1987) and Dickinson's learner training techniques (1992). Appropriate learner training constitutes a vital ingredient in the process of acquiring the capacity for autonomy. In reality, it rarely happens in any formalised manner and students are expected to just go ahead and learn on their own with piecemeal help from hard-pressed teachers, often unaware themselves of what it involves. While this remains the case, there is no point in language departments deluding themselves that all students are getting a good deal from their autonomous learning. Some of them certainly are, despite lack of training: they are excited by the range of materials and new technologies and find enjoyable ways to use them, if not always the most effective in terms of improving language skills. Others, for a whole variety of reasons, flounder without help and guidance. A balance has to be aimed at in which learners are, in the words of Barnett (1993, 299), neither 'too carefully led' nor 'too carelessly left alone'.

REASSESSING TEACHING AND LEARNING

It is difficult for languages departments to implement policies that take into account the fact that learners are not a homogeneous group, mainly because these are so costly and staff-intensive. In practice, there is really very little flexibility, particularly at lower levels, on ways of implementing the autonomous elements of a course. Students are often required to listen to a specified audio cassette or watch a designated extract on video and then work on the related worksheet. This is working on your own, but it can hardly be called autonomy, for it involves no self-direction or choice, except perhaps over when you do the work. On a more positive note, the enthusiasm shown by many students and teachers has not initially come about through learner training or staff development. The ultimatum to operate within a programme containing autonomous learning elements, and the pressure to produce materials for autonomous learning and to induct students into the workings of a Language Learning Centre have in many cases converted or at least alerted initially reluctant staff to the benefits of such an approach. If nothing more, the change to incorporate an autonomous element has called into question previously unchallenged teaching and learning methods and encouraged teachers critically to reassess what they actually do in the classroom and how this might be better managed and assessed. In some cases it has also caused teachers to look more closely at their learners, and, in particular, with increasing numbers of foreign students

registering for courses, to address the question of how ethnic and other differences might affect learning capacity.

The problem is not so much that language practitioners cannot agree on the desirability of encouraging students to take an active part in their own learning, but rather that the very flexibility recommended as necessary by theorists is unrealistic in practice. Standardisation in the nature and quality of language delivery across the board, in the interests of objectiveness and fairness to all students, means that either students are all required to approach parts of their language learning autonomously or they are not. There is no room for some students to learn by autonomous means and others to attend classes, unless we are talking about 'extra' learning in addition to prescribed hours. It is not, however, beyond the bounds of possibility that language learners of the future might indeed be given this choice. Modern language teaching and learning methods in schools today, in which autonomy is playing an increasingly important role, are likely to equip learners with the skills and confidence they need to opt for, or indeed expect autonomous learning approaches when they reach university. The implications for managing this kind of flexibility are daunting, but need to be addressed by all those in HE involved in the delivery of languages, if they are not to get left behind.

INTERACTING WITH OTHERS

Another point raised against autonomous language learning is that of social isolation. Language is said to be about communicating meaning to others, about creating social bonds with others and not about being on your own. But we need to ask ourselves if, in a world in which interaction with machinery or with other human beings through machinery is fast becoming the norm, this argument still holds weight. Increasing use of the Internet means that humans are interacting with each other in their thousands, frequently, effectively and at a speed which would have been unimaginable until relatively recently. This is not to say that the acquisition of language skills is no longer a problem for autonomous learners. What it might mean, however, is that we are led to look at what exactly constitutes skill in speaking, and possibly to disassociate it from the necessity to involve face-to-face interaction. What is to be learned from such interaction might locate itself more readily in the area of cultural awareness.

Lest we get carried away by the idea that technology is some kind of panacea which will fill the social and pedagogical gaps left by autonomous language learning, it is worth remembering that the role of the teacher in all this remains crucial and that the traditional relationship between dependent or recipient (learner) and controller, imparter of knowledge (teacher) is changing to become increasingly one of interdependence. Lew Barnett (1993, 296-297) warns us that,

'The important role of trainer is often absent from self-access and frequently ignored by those who focus on technology [...] The danger grows as technology becomes, increasingly, the substitute tutor; it is my contention that all too often technology seeks to achieve the independence of the learner not by developing his self-direction, learning skills and responsibility, but by imitating as closely as possible traditional teacher roles which tend to control learners.'

He further warns about the 'trap' many have fallen into in thinking that the interactivity inherent in CALL programmes gives students any real control over or responsibility for their learning. Multimedia does not escape criticism either, for without proper guidance, students are likely to "simply wander through this hyperspace with no sense of direction, much less self-direction" (Barnett, 1993: 300). Yet far from dismissing technology, he contends that it has an important role to play in developing metacognitive skills in the learner, and should be used to this end.

Technology is moving forward at a pace that cannot be ignored. For distance language learners, in particular, what it can offer, whether at a basic level through telephone tuition or in a more complex form through multi-media, puts it firmly at the forefront of learning. The arrival of the 'virtual class' has significant implications for all those in education, in particular those involved in setting up autonomous learning programmes. It cannot replace language teachers, but may play a major role in freeing them up to concentrate more on teaching specific skills, possibly in smaller groups, and to engage in research. There is no evidence to believe that teachers will have a lesser role in the learning of languages, though this role will certainly change. While autonomous learning is becoming more widespread and, for those at a distance, is the only option, there are likely to remain large numbers of students who, given the choice, will prefer at least some classroom-based learning. The benefits of learning in a group, in terms of enjoyment and opportunities for social interaction, are unlikely to be outweighed by autonomous learning methods. Warriner-Burke (1990, 131) stresses the importance of the 'human element' in learning a language,

'Many experienced foreign language professionals think that language and language learning are deeply human experiences and that most students who are successful learners were inspired by teachers whom they liked and who personally challenged them. [...] Perhaps it is this human factor that distinguishes foreign language learning from other knowledge...'

"Technology is moving forward at a pace that cannot be ignored"

CONCLUSION

The arguments outlined in this article indicate that, whatever the disadvantages might be, autonomy is likely to become an increasingly important consideration in the design of language learning programmes. More generally, the concept of taking control, of accepting responsibility is a key part of the discussion that continues to be had around transferable skills, a key feature of the Enterprise in Higher Education initiative. The implication is that as well as producing graduates competent in their chosen subject area, it is incumbent upon lecturers also to ensure that their students leave university equipped with the necessary transferable skills to face the market place. Many of these skills – ability to work independently, set your own targets, manage your time – can be easily identified as coming under the general heading of autonomy. While recognising the limits to its effectiveness as an approach to language learning in the current climate of resource cutbacks, it is important to keep in mind the increasing range of learning opportunities it offers learners, the research opportunities and possibilities for a change in role that it offers teachers, and the potential it has, if properly managed, to aid institutional managers in their attempt to deliver language programmes to increasing numbers of students on decreasing levels of resource.

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PUBLICATION TWO

Hurd, S. (1998b) Autonomy, at any price? Issues and concerns from a British HE perspective. *Foreign Language Annals* 31 (2), 219-230. ISSN 0015-718X.

Autonomy at Any Price? Issues and Concerns from a British HE Perspective

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ABSTRACT *To remain viable in today's stringent financial climate, British university departments are having to recruit more and more students and look increasingly to less costly alternative forms of delivery. Autonomous learning is seen by many to be the obvious option. Some language departments have responded by introducing autonomous language learning into their curriculum, and there are a number of interesting and innovative approaches that have been developed in a small number of universities. This article sounds a warning that it is neither an easy nor a cheap alternative and that there are important economic, psychological, pedagogical, and practical issues to address if autonomous language learning is to achieve any measure of success.*

Introduction

Changes in language teaching and learning methods and approaches may be prompted by practical reasons or claim to have theoretical underpinning from linguistics, psychology, or other disciplines. Whatever the rationale for change, if teachers do not have a clear understanding of the what, why, and how of any approach, the resultant practice is often quite different from that which was envisaged. This has certainly been a major concern for autonomous language learning.

In the early part of the 1990s, when the concept of autonomy was first starting to be applied to language learning, mostly in relation to programs for nonspecialist language learners, reaction ranged from outright hostility to cautious acceptance. Many lecturers interpreted the call to push ahead with autonomy as a criticism of current teaching practice and a ploy to reduce teaching staff. Few seemed to know what it really was and among those who did claim to do so, there was a general lack of consensus on how it could or should be implemented. An abundance of descrip-

tive terms under the general banner of autonomous learning—open, flexible, independent, self-directed, resource-based, individualized—confused more than clarified, and lent support to the critics. It has therefore been incumbent upon those wishing or needing to implement an autonomous approach to develop a better understanding of the concept of autonomy in terms of its possibilities and limitations for language learning within programs with fixed goals.

Defining Autonomy

"Autonomy" in its absolute sense is defined in the Collins English dictionary as "freedom to determine one's own actions, behavior, etc.," and "autonomous" as "independent of others." This corresponds well to the language learning approach adopted at Henri Holec's institution, the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL) in Nancy, France, where learners are allowed choice over the degree to which they wish to become self-directed in their learning and are given, within reasonable limits, as much support as they need. Holec (1981, 3) claims that not only is autonomy a capacity, but it is also "the ability to take charge of one's learning," which is a skill "to

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be acquired by 'natural' means or in a systematic, deliberate way." According to Holec, learners alone are responsible for deciding what is to be learned, when, how, in what order, and by what means. It is also their responsibility to set their own goals and measure the degree to which they have been effective in attaining them. Holec (1985, 189) is interested primarily in adapting the teaching to the learner and not the learner to the teaching, but is against any notion of imposition of teaching or learning method or approach, seeing that as a "contradiction in educational terms." In other words, you cannot compel people to be autonomous, if at the same time you wish to maintain notions of choice and freedom in learning, and a recognition of the diversity of learners' needs and abilities.

In Research Centers such as CRAPEL it is possible to operate a system that encourages a fully autonomous approach to learning. But for lecturers in British universities, constrained to deliver a program with predetermined outcomes and to ensure as best they can that students attain externally set goals, such an extreme version of autonomy is clearly not feasible. Nevertheless, a rejection of autonomy as practiced by CRAPEL should not rule out other, more flexible interpretations, especially for those of us who genuinely believe that "developing students as autonomous learners is the proper aim of university education" (Wall 1997). Indeed, the number of research projects taking place in British universities gives strong evidence to support the view that learner autonomy is a matter of degree, and that we should concentrate our efforts on what is possible and desirable within an autonomous approach, rather than abandon the whole notion.

The six titles in the series on Learner Autonomy, published by Authentik Language Learning Resources at Trinity College Dublin, 1991-1997, have been influential in identifying and exploring the main issues and coming up with workable interpretations of autonomy for the language learning environment. The areas they cover are definitions and problems,

learner training, classroom techniques, the role of authentic texts, motivation, and developing learners' thinking skills. David Little (1991, 3-4) in *Learner Autonomy 1, Definitions, Issues and Problems* goes some way toward establishing the framework within which the term can be used and outlines five "misconceptions" or "false assumptions" that are current: 1) that autonomous learners make the teacher redundant, 2) that any intervention on the part of the teacher may destroy whatever autonomy the learners have managed to attain, 3) that autonomy is a new methodology, 4) that autonomy is an easily described behavior, and 5) that autonomy is a steady state achieved by certain learners. Along with many others writing in this field, he talks of autonomy in terms of a "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action."

Whatever the variations may be in interpreting the term, there seems to be no dispute, however, that it is what the learner brings to the learning process and the learning materials which not only determines his or her degree of autonomy, but is also often a measure of learning success. The "capacity" to learn autonomously is seen to develop from a state of self-awareness and willingness to take an active part. In order for learners to achieve this state, teachers must also play their part. It is no easy option for either side.

Research Projects

Over the last ten years, the wealth of books, articles, and conference papers devoted to aspects of learner autonomy testifies to the growing importance of this particular approach to learning. Leading researchers such as Holec, Little, Riley, and Dickinson have done much to clarify what is meant by autonomy, to outline its possibilities and limitations, and to widen our knowledge of what is needed for it to work successfully. More recently, a number of interesting and innovative research projects carried out in British universities have produced important findings and raised further questions.

At Brighton University (Carpenter 1996, 23-

38), a group of first-year French students, supported by their tutor, was given responsibility for the preparation and conduct of a three-hour weekly class throughout the summer term of 1995. While there were problems to do with inexperience and lack of confidence, the positive outcomes were improved motivation and a deeper awareness of teaching and learning processes and strategies. The study concluded that

peer-teaching, by handing over responsibility for learning to students, but within a clear framework, seems to be an effective way of providing learners with some of the software that will help them make a step forward on the autonomous path. (37)

An evaluation of a self-study system at the University of the West of England (Beeching 1996, 81-104), in which students and tutors were invited to complete questionnaires on learning styles, organizational issues, and the use of materials, underlined the need for "extensive staff and student preparation" (Broady and Kenning 1996, 17) to make such a system viable and effective. An earlier study of self-access language learning at the University of Central Lancashire (Hurd 1994, 126-134) highlighted the need for staff development in specific areas:

Teachers need training and guidance, not only in materials development, but also in areas such as learner support, use and management of resources, responding appropriately to a variety of language needs, assessing progress, using and authoring computer-based activities, and many more. (130)

A research project at the University of East Anglia (Guillot 1996, 139-157), set up to explore and evaluate the resource-based language learning opportunities offered by *Le Monde* sur CD-ROM found that interacting with a database offered potentially ideal conditions for promoting learner autonomy. Learners had to define for themselves what they were looking for, select from a wide vari-

ety of articles, and assess the outcome of their search. It was acknowledged that difficulties could arise in the handling of huge numbers of texts. Access procedures to the database would therefore need to be "broken down into manageable chunks" to enable students to make the most of the task and avoid the frustration and time-wasting that too much choice can bring.

Tandem learning that "takes place when native speakers of two different languages join forces to study each other's mother tongue" was the focus of a project at Sheffield University (Lewis, Woodin, and St. John 1996, 105-120). Described as "a social strategy for independent learning based on partnership," it also aimed to provide "a focus for reflection on language learning and teaching." Students met together once a week to learn a foreign language with their native-speaker tandem partner. The sessions were timetabled and supported by worksheets and other materials for independent use. Within this "fixed" set-up, students were encouraged to work autonomously. Tutor input was progressively reduced as students became more and more confident and willing to take on responsibility for their own learning. The findings of the project revealed increased confidence and greater cultural awareness among students. There were also positive comments from students on the access tandem learning gave them to authentic language and instant error-correction. The researchers concluded that while tandem partnerships are not synonymous with autonomous learning, they nevertheless "offer a way of helping learners to attain autonomy."

A study of ethnicity and the autonomous language learner (Press 1996, 237-259) was carried out at Westminster University. Its findings, based on questionnaires containing questions on ethnolinguistic identity, ethnicity and beliefs, ethnicity and strategies, and ethnicity and motivation, point to significant differences among learners, particularly in the affective dimension, and lend weight to the view that activities should be "deliberately varied, encouraging individual *and* group

work, traditional tasks such as rote learning, *and* more creative tasks such as listening for gist information or jigsaw reading.” With regard to autonomy, it concluded that “increasing evidence of different cultural expectations requires a more sensitive interpretation of the concept” and that “some students could be de-motivated if expected to work without firm instructions or formal assessment coming from the teacher.”

These projects are clear evidence that autonomy is not something that can be achieved immediately by all learners. It is a long-term objective that takes time to develop and requires teacher support and intervention. Other research has concentrated on more general aspects of learner autonomy, such as the need for study skills, learner training, and the role of self-assessment. All paint a similar picture: 1) we cannot make any assumptions or expectations about learners’ willingness or ability to become autonomous learners, 2) learners need more guidance and support than is generally anticipated in order to develop the confidence they need to survive outside the classroom, and 3) learners need to be shown how to reflect on their own learning styles and strategies, to become self-aware, in order to be in a position to take an active part in their own learning.

Evaluating New Approaches

In the present university climate of continual change, it is more important than ever that new approaches be properly evaluated and tested before being implemented, and ideally that they should form part of that change, contribute positively, and not represent an additional burden. New does not equal better, nor does it imply that previous approaches and methods were wholly deficient and ineffective.

Approaches are not right or wrong in themselves or in some absolute sense (according to the latest developments in applied linguistics, say) but only in relationship to individual learners, their needs and their situations. (Riley 1985, xxi)

In the move toward a more student-centered approach and greater student responsibility and choice, autonomy in language learning can be seen to extend some of the best principles of the communicative approach. This approach, which is now accepted and applied in the majority of language classrooms across all sectors in the United Kingdom, was also highly criticized in its early days for producing students who were grammatically unaware, inaccurate in writing and speaking and overreliant on memorized expressions and prefabricated patterns that had little to do with communication. One of the major problems was its wholesale adoption by armies of teachers, usually at the expense of other approaches and methods that might have had their day but nevertheless still had some validity in the modern language classroom.

The communicative approach has never implied, however, that students could learn outside the classroom without a teacher present. Activities have always remained firmly within the control of the teacher who uses his or her professional judgment to assess the communicative needs of learners and respond to these needs.

Krashen and Terrell’s “natural approach” (1983, 9), while generally supportive of a communicative approach, is not in agreement with one of its basic precepts, that we learn by *using* the language. Krashen’s main contention is that acquisition of a second language depends on listening and that learners acquire language through “comprehensible input.” He claims that learning and acquisition refer to different processes and that the former (learning) cannot be converted to the latter (acquisition). Conscious learning can only act as a monitor of accuracy. This thinking runs counter to communicative methods adopted in many British schools and universities. It also does not bear out the experience of many linguists who have learned by traditional approaches and yet also acquired fluency in a second language.

Nevertheless, there are elements of the natural approach that would seem to tie in with

autonomy. Krashen emphasizes the need for a stress-free environment and a good rapport between teacher and learner to promote language acquisition. Topics covered should be interesting and relevant in order to encourage students to react and express their views. These are also necessary prerequisites for successful autonomous learning. Krashen's insistence on the right to remain silent until you are ready to speak also corresponds to the general notions of freedom and choice, however limited, which are central to an autonomous approach. Nevertheless, while an autonomous approach aims to allow as much freedom as possible over learning method, it does not disallow conscious processes such as learning grammar, raising one's awareness of language, and building vocabulary lists, which are all seen as part of the cognitive skills that form the base of autonomous language learning. In other words, contrary to Krashen's view, language learning and language acquisition are not considered to be mutually exclusive.

An autonomous approach goes a great deal further than any other approach in empowering students to make decisions about their own learning; however, the problems it poses for teachers, learners, and institutions in terms of balancing conflicting priorities, the general lack of agreement about its role, and the fact that it is more often seen as a threat than a positive step forward continue to mean that attaining universal acceptance is a slow and painful process.

Economic Considerations

The major economic justification for autonomous learning is that since society does not have the resources to provide for the vast range of individual learning needs, anything that shifts the emphasis from teacher to learner is justifiable and represents a cost-effective way of managing change. Those who are convinced of the economic advantages of moving toward some form of self-access delivery would, on the face of it, appear to be right. More students learning on their own means fewer teachers and consequently financial sav-

ings. In other words, once the initial investment has been made, apart from general maintenance, the ongoing costs should be small and the overall savings brought about through not recruiting more teachers considerable. In a number of British universities, a substantial investment has been made in the setting up of a Self-Access or Language Learning Resource Center, in some cases requiring large-scale building work and the purchase of new furniture and fittings. In all cases, new equipment has had to be bought, often to the tune of many thousands of pounds.

Such generous expenditure does not come without ties, and the onus is usually on teachers to make it work and prove that the investment was indeed justified. While increased resources are, of course, always welcome, it is a false assumption to imagine that throwing money into the setting up of a Center will somehow solve the problem of mass delivery. The idea that spending equals results leaves out all the vital middle stages, those that involve organization, staffing, training, syllabus design, and materials development. If the move is not thoroughly planned and each stage carefully addressed, it is left to a few enthusiastic and usually hard-pressed lecturers to make the Center operational and to demonstrate its effectiveness in an unrealistically short time. The pressure for results can put an intolerable strain on teaching staff, can be seriously demotivating, and has an unacceptably high risk factor.

For the truly skeptical, the hidden agenda is straightforward—stabilizing of recruitment of new staff, at best; cutting of existing staff, in particular part-time lecturers, at worst. In some British universities, there is, moreover, a chronic under-resourcing in terms of technical and administrative staff, without whom no Learning Resource Center has much chance of success. It is also a myth to suppose that more autonomous learning equals less teacher input: "The time spent on materials development and course management will be high in order to compensate for the reduced student-teacher contact resulting from larger classes" (Mar Molinero 1993, 46).

If the goal of autonomous learning is nothing more than self-directed as an alternative to tutor-directed learning—in other words using a Self-Access or Learning Resource Centre as a form of teacher-substitute—then once the individualized learning programs have been devised, “providing pre-fabricated paths of self-instruction in certain skills or practice areas” (Aston 1993, 220), the teacher’s involvement becomes minimal. If we believe, however, that autonomy entails at least some responsibility for active participation in the learning process, rather than passive acceptance of a predetermined set of learning materials, the economic arguments start to lose their force. The role of the teacher becomes central to the setting up and running of systems, and this in turn incurs costs. According to Little and Singleton (1989, 32-3):

If successful language learning depends on interaction with a large and varied diet of textual materials and the development within the learner of a capacity to take decisive initiatives, then we must provide the learner with resources that he or she can draw on *as an individual*. According to this view all language learning turns out to have a self-instructional component, and the self-access system is seen not as an alternative to the teacher but as a necessary resource for all language learners. The expertise required of the teacher is no longer confined to the target language system but embraces the analysis of learners’ needs and interests, the organization of learning resources (including a self-access system), the stimulation and monitoring of learners’ interaction with target language texts and with one another, advice on the selection of input materials, and counselling on various aspects of the learning process. Not surprisingly, all these roles are also required of the person whose task it is to set up and manage a self-access system for predominantly self-instructional learning.

It is perhaps those institutional managers subscribing to the first view who find economic justifications unproblematic, for if the

vision is one of a designated center in which students learn unaided and untrained, not exercising any real autonomy over their learning in terms of content or strategy, the conviction will remain that the above additional teacher roles are redundant. But such a vision of learning is unrealistic and unworkable within a sector containing such a varied student body in age, background, and aspiration. It is also inappropriate to a university environment that is all about interaction, growth, and responsibility. Working through individualized programs along predetermined lines encourages none of these things. It is also unlikely to promote real and lasting progress in the attainment of language skills.

The argument on economic grounds can thus be justified only for a certain type of individualized language learning, perhaps as a remedial aid or for extra practice of specific grammatical or lexical areas of language, outside the main body of the course and requiring little or no teacher input. Implementing a truly autonomous approach is expensive both in time and money. Budget holders hoping to economize by setting up self-access facilities are finding increasingly that they can do so only by attracting users from outside to bring in the extra funds that such systems need in order to function well, maximize their considerable potential, and provide quality learning opportunities for their students.

Psychological and Social Considerations

While psychological justifications for an autonomous approach to learning are often linked to ideological justifications for such an approach to living in general—the idea that society should be made up of self-directed individuals taking responsibility for their own lives—it is legitimate to ask whether the link itself has any justification in practice. Holec (1981, 34) contends that “self-directed language learning is essentially similar to self-directed education generally and the latter in turn is part of self-directed overall social behavior. From one point of view, therefore, autonomy in an individual in one of these spheres cannot be dissociated from his auton-

omy in other areas." He then, however, goes on to ask: "Can an individual 'live' in a state of partial autonomy such as would relate solely to his learning of languages in a general environment of dependence and passivity?" Holec's question could be interpreted as:

1) Is it legitimate to expect students to learn autonomously within an institutional environment that imposes constraints on other aspects of their learning? If autonomy is a state to be reached, a capability, can it be applied at will, switched on and off?

Or, looking at the question in wider terms:

2) If learners choose to be passive in other areas of their life, by, for example, declining to exercise their constitutional rights, are they likely to wish or to be able to become active learners with regard to their learning of languages?

He is perhaps doing no more than asking teachers to consider carefully what the limits to learner autonomy might be, before attempting to introduce it wholesale into language programs. He is also drawing attention to the importance of recognizing in general the wide range of learner characteristics, and in particular the diversity of student readiness for autonomy dictated by the psychological make-up of each individual learner. By extension, he is warning of the dangers of treating students as a homogeneous body of learners.

The arguments put forward by Illich (1979), Rogers (1990), and Kelly (1963) that the learner and not the teacher is the central figure in his or her own learning and that each learner learns according to his or her own system of personal constructs are highly persuasive, but should not be taken too literally nor pushed to extremes. Putting the learner at the center should not mean withdrawing support and guidance, nor refraining from intervention when appropriate. It is not necessary to go to the opposite extreme in order to counteract the inflexibility and constraints of outdated teacher-centered methods. Psychologists Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991, 45) point out that adopting an overpermissive approach "can be just as limiting for the learner." Learners need the right

psychological conditions in which to learn but "a diffuse concern for the learner arising perhaps out of a mixed-up sentimentality does not generate these conditions; neither does the *laissez-faire* approach created when people think they can go along with these ideas without fully understanding them."

Davies (1987, 15-16) also makes clear that psychological arguments lose ground if students are not equipped with the necessary learning skills and abilities in order to make best use of their freedom of choice. They need to develop appropriate technical skills and the "ability to sift, to analyze, to synthesize." Without such skills, learners are unable to become autonomous and are, moreover, very likely to become frustrated, confused, and disillusioned:

To "abandon" a student to an assignment without [...] providing any guidance, for example, is not an educational innovation—though it is often done; it is a cop-out. The thing is, of course, that it need not be so. The inquiry situation has tremendous potential provided that it is progressive—provided we realize the need to help a learner how to learn and help to develop his skills with continuing guidance.

Gathercole (1990, 9) makes the point that learners move from one stage to the next only when they are ready to do so. He reminds us of the internalized nature of learning and that "we cannot control what goes on inside each learner's head... learners need time and psychological space in which to learn." He also points out that learners may be very resistant to the whole idea of autonomy, wishing only to pass their exams and feeling that it is the teacher's role to prepare them. Such learners feel more comfortable in a state of dependence and have a psychological need for approval. Similar criticisms are often voiced from within the ranks of those paying adult learners who are uninterested in theories of learning and assume that payment alone will bring the desired results. They argue that there is no difference between paying for goods or

services and paying for teaching. All are products to be obtained in exchange for money, and, just as you would not get involved in the servicing of your car if you've paid a garage to do it, so you would not expect to get involved in your own learning. The teacher in a self-access system is seen to be shirking his or her responsibility by denying the learner access to a classroom-based set-up.

Many learners and teachers also express worries about the nature and quality of language learning experienced by students learning on their own. The results of Gremmo's questionnaire carried out at CRAPEL (1988, 119) reveal in particular the problem of solitude: "Se retrouver seul chez soi pour prendre des décisions est un moment assez traumatisant pour beaucoup d'entre eux." ("Having to take decisions at home on your own is quite traumatic for many of them.") Leman (1994, 18-19), in a review of the German course *Solo*, is also highly critical of the social isolation entailed by autonomous language learning. He believes that "exercising a language is probably the most powerful social bond we know" and asks "What kind of people relish doing things on their own?" He concludes that "the social unit of a classroom is an extremely precious environment" and that "we as teachers should fight these developments towards social isolation."

Esch (1976, 973-75) cites the work of Pask in identifying two types of learners: "serialists" who prefer the lock-step approach and "holists" who prefer to immerse themselves in the language and try to engage with native speakers right from the beginning, however meager their language skills. Different characteristics mean different cognitive styles and "if you impose on learners the strategy which does not correspond to their 'type,' they do not learn properly and do not retain what they have learnt." Holec (1981, 34) in his book on *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* concludes that self-direction should remain

a possibility offered to and not forced upon the learners, "a tendency to be encouraged" ...There is no question of wishing to force the

learner to assume responsibility for his learning at all costs..... what must be developed is the learner's ability to assume this responsibility.

The implication here is that if we are encouraging choice, we must bear in mind the possibility that learners, even those who have been trained in learning strategies and reached a high degree of self-awareness, may choose not to be autonomous in their learning. And this in turn could have very far-reaching implications for the organization of language learning within universities.

The teacher, too, may well have difficulty adapting to the shift in role from teacher to "adviser" that autonomous learning entails, particularly when it involves the use of technology. It is worth bearing in mind the warning given by Lew Barnett (1995, 296-7):

The important role of trainer is often absent from self-access and frequently ignored by those who focus on technology [...] The danger grows as technology becomes, increasingly, the substitute tutor; it is my contention that all too often technology seeks to achieve the independence of the learner not by developing his self-direction, learning skills, and responsibility, but by imitating as closely as possible traditional teacher roles which tend to control learners.

Barnett is equally critical of multimedia approaches, considering that without proper guidance, students are likely to "simply wander through this hyperspace with no sense of direction, much less *self*-direction." He is emphasizing the point made earlier that autonomous learning, whatever form it takes, far from releasing the teacher, requires that he or she maintain a high level of involvement.

To date, most research has concentrated on autonomous language learning from the point of view of the learner. The effect on the quality of the teaching as opposed to the learning experience has been largely ignored. One interesting research project carried out at Hull University by Debra Marsh

(1997, 21-25) is optimistic in this respect. The project successfully used E-mail and computer-mediated conferencing to reduce learner isolation and encourage peer support and collaborative learning. Research findings indicated that "students tended to be more open and aware of the processes they were going through to learn the language" (23). The criticism often levelled at technology and computers that they are "impersonal and unfriendly" was not borne out by those involved in the project: "The experience shared by the students and me in this project reflects the opposite. The students felt much closer to me and appreciated the immediate feedback on their thoughts and fears on their language learning experience" (24).

While for some learners the only available option is to learn on their own at a distance with or without support, it is important to keep in mind that the benefits of learning in a group, in terms of enjoyment and opportunities for social interaction, are unlikely to be outweighed by solitary autonomous learning methods. Warriner-Burke (1990, 131) stresses the importance of the "human element" in learning a language:

Many experienced foreign language professionals think that language and language learning are deeply human experiences and that most students who are successful learners were inspired by teachers whom they liked and who personally challenged them. [...] Perhaps it is this human factor that distinguishes foreign language learning from other knowledge...

Pedagogical Considerations

"Men are not free when they are doing just what they like. The moment you can do just what you like there is nothing you care about doing." This warning from D.H. Lawrence is quoted by Lew Barnett in his paper on "Computer Technology, Guidance, and Self-Access" (1993, 295-296) in which he underlines the need for students to be guided into a position from where they can make meaningful choices. He is nevertheless concerned that

advocates of learner autonomy "might be doing the Devil's work by encouraging learners to learn alone, but not well."

Autonomous language learning makes particular demands on the language teacher for it involves not just knowledge of its theoretical and practical possibilities and limits, but also an awareness of what it is to be a good language learner, the metacognitive strategies needed to reach this state, and how to transfer such knowledge to the learner. Then there are questions on content, method, design, and assessment of self-access learning materials. The balance of language skills is also a crucial consideration, both within materials to be used autonomously and also between the taught and untaught elements of a course. Teachers need to be competent, too, in the use and capability of all technologies old and new, in order to be able to ensure that learners make the best use of the opportunities they offer. Teachers also need to adapt to a more flexible role, that of facilitator, counselor, and supporter, as well as source and imparter of knowledge, in order to address both the cognitive and metacognitive needs of their students. Finally, they must be excellent managers and organizers. Unmanaged autonomy is likely to lead to a free-for-all, with muddle and confusion the inevitable outcome.

Even if we set aside the question of whether all this is worth the effort, and assume for the time being that it is, if teachers do manage to match up to all these demands and thoroughly prepare their learners, there are still many issues to address in the design of autonomous learning materials. These include the organization and input of grammar; the degree of open-endedness and learner support; the length, type, and follow-up to activities; the integration of language skills; the use of the target language; and the methods of assessment. The most serious drawback of autonomous language learning, however, concerns the acquisition of oral skills. Learning a language involves communicating, both in writing and through the spoken word. While writing is a legitimate solo activity, speaking is not, unless we are talking only

about monologues, speeches, and answer-phone messages. Moreover, real communication implies a two-way process between giver and receiver involving elements of unpredictability and surprise. Working alone, the autonomous learner can at best practice only the techniques of oral production—pronunciation, intonation, pausing, and stress—using examples on audio as models for imitation and comparison. What he or she cannot do is transfer learning to real as opposed to imagined spoken contexts. Rowsell and Libben (1994, 671) ask the crucial question:

How then can independent learners communicate or attend to meaning? Like the Zen Buddhist initiate, they are forced to imagine "the sound of one hand clapping." Either the successful independent learner finds an ingenious means of achieving communication in isolation or he or she manages to make progress in learning a language without treating it as a communicative system.

If we can go one stage further and consider the possibility that autonomous learning does not always have to entail working in isolation, then projects such as tandem learning and self-help language groups, despite obvious practical problems, have a great deal to contribute. Activities that bring students together informally to practice the language and share learning strategies can play a very important role in building confidence and fostering autonomy. They can't replace the teacher, nor can they deal with new learning in any systematic or testable way. They can, nonetheless, offer ways to plug the oral communication gap by offering opportunities for real live interaction (albeit, in the mother tongue as well as the target language), while at the same time encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning.

The research projects that have been undertaken would indicate that although "the land of complete autonomy for learners is not exactly paradise," there is much that is positive about autonomous language learning. If nothing more, the change to incorporate an

autonomous element has called into question previously unchallenged teaching and learning methods and encouraged teachers to critically reassess what they actually do in the classroom and how this might be better managed and assessed. In some cases it has also caused teachers to look more closely at their learners, and, in particular, with increasing numbers of foreign students registering for courses, to address the question of how ethnic and other differences might affect learning capacity. As Sheerin (1991, 154) points out, however, evaluating its effectiveness is by no means a straightforward process if it exists as part of a multifaceted approach to language learning, rather than as the sole learning mode, since we cannot separate out the learning that has taken place autonomously from that which has not. She further questions what is meant by success: "Is there some external criterion or is it a question of the learner judging himself by goals which he himself has set?" For university students, obtaining the desired degree classification is likely to be the determinant of success, but it still does not tell us the extent to which autonomous learning contributed toward that success.

Practical Considerations

However convincing the theory, actually implementing autonomous language programs in British higher education would seem to be fraught with difficulty at every level. Students attend for a finite time, their goals are predetermined, and the syllabus is already in place before they arrive. Providers, consumers, and planners all have their own, often conflicting, agendas. It might therefore seem seriously unrealistic to consider many of the features of autonomous learning: negotiating outcomes, deciding the content, selecting materials, and self-assessment. University language degree programs are not yet that flexible. Moreover, the kind of flexibility needed for an autonomous approach would be seen by many as an unacceptable disruption to established practice, particularly as research into its effectiveness is still at a relatively limited stage.

Davies (1987) exposes the gap that gener-

ally exists between concept and reality, in that institutions are generally unable to adopt approaches that are truly student-centered (even if that is what they desire) because of external constraints

imposed either by individual limitations or by the demands of society and/or the requirements of the providers.... Thus the approaches, instead of being student-centered as the visionaries wish, become more student-oriented—trying to provide some increase in learner participation but within an overall imposed framework. (12)

What is actually on offer is increased access, rather than increased autonomy. Davies (50) uses the analogy of a cafeteria system as opposed to a fixed menu to demonstrate the limits of provision for autonomous learning: conventional provision is replaced by "flexible access with some apparent element of choice, though the individual choices are still effectively predetermined."

Another important practical consideration concerns numbers. In some British universities, particularly those with large institution-wide language programs providing for nonspecialist language learners, there are in theory too many students for the available facilities. In other words, if some students were not remiss in carrying out their center-based self-access language work, centers would not be able to cope. Even if autonomous learning does not rely entirely on access to a resource center, it is still unlikely that facilities can ever be adequate for the numbers of potential learners. Is it realistic, then, to aim only for partial success, accepting that if we are too successful the systems will break down?

Conclusion

The range of concerns outlined in this article all point to the need for a consensus among those involved in the delivery of languages regarding: a) how much autonomy is realistic and practical in a particular language department of a higher education institution, b) how can it fit into the existing programs

and mesh with the taught element, c) who takes responsibility for developing materials, for training learners and teachers, and for monitoring and evaluating, and d) what are the time/cost considerations likely to be. Research cited earlier on aspects of autonomous learning, together with practical projects carried out with groups of students, represent a significant move forward in the autonomous language learning debate, while at the same time raising more questions and issues that require close examination. What also emerges very clearly is the overwhelming need for a continued sharing of experience and ideas in order to harness the considerable potential of autonomous language learning and to ensure the quality of its content and management within all language programs.

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PUBLICATION THREE

Hurd, S. (1999a) Developing skills for the 21st century: lessons from autonomy in language learning. *New Academic* 8 (1), 3-7. ISSN 0964 6353.

DEVELOPING SKILLS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:

LESSONS FROM AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Autonomy in learning looms large in everyday discussions as academics debate the future of HE.

What subject could be more illustrative of the need for the student to take responsibility for learning than language? Taking language learning as a model, *Stella Hurd* examines the key issues that need to be addressed if students are to be equipped for the 21st century.



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In the current debate about graduate standards, teaching and learning methodologies and assessment measures, increasing attention is being paid to the role of autonomy in learning. Not only is it a fitting goal in its own right for students in HE as preparation for lifelong learning, but it is also increasingly seen as closely bound up with the qualities and skills needed for the workplace: self-reliance and resourcefulness, flexibility and good time-management, persistence, tolerance and patience. Using modern languages as a model, this article attempts to identify and bring together some of the key issues that need to be addressed if autonomy is to become more firmly embedded in university curricula across the board.

THE NEED FOR A CONSENSUS

Although there are many examples of successful implementation of autonomous approaches across the university sector, there appears to date to be no consensus on exactly what autonomy means and the extent of its realistic application to the learning of languages in different contexts. If the word '*autonomy*' is used at all to refer to language learning activities over which students have some control, it is often qualified by '*semi*' or '*partial*'. '*Independent learning*' is often the preferred descriptor, as it appears to allow more freedom of interpretation.

Learning described as *self-access*, *self-managed*, *self-directed*, *open*, *flexible* or *resource-based* always

involves some autonomy but is not synonymous with it.

The root problem is that HE operates within fixed goals tied to stated aims and objectives and learning outcomes, a system which appears to many to be incompatible with autonomy.

There is a choice: either we confine ourselves to purist interpretations and therefore block productive discussion; or we embrace the notion, refuse to get bogged down with fine distinctions and push ahead in whatever way seems appropriate. In other words, we attempt to get into the circle in which theory and practice feed each other and create new branches and new circles.

Those who have made the latter

choice, and set up projects with language learners, have enriched the quality of learning for their students, helped to define limits and possibilities and opened up new areas for debate and research. Some of these projects are briefly outlined in a later section.

Work is in progress, through the Funding for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) Language Projects, which may well come up with workable versions of autonomy that can be understood and applied more systematically. Or it may be that we have to learn to live with complexity, and accept it as an underlying feature of autonomy within a university setting.

There does appear to be general agreement, however, on several important matters: the critical role of the teacher in autonomous learning, the need for tutor and learning training and the fact that autonomous learning does not lead to savings in staff time.

AUTONOMY AND STUDENT DIVERSITY

Given the diversity of students' aspirations, needs and abilities, the variety of learning styles and the range of personal expectations, a degree of autonomy would certainly seem to be desirable. Different characteristics mean different cognitive styles. Esch (1976) warns us that *'if you impose on learners the strategy which does not correspond to their 'type', they do not learn properly and do not retain what they have learnt'*. Autonomy can help in allowing a degree of freedom over learning style.

However, it is important to gauge the degree of autonomy that is appropriate in a given context and avoid rushing in without a clear focus. Students do not automatically have the ability to be autonomous in their learning and need to be shown how to develop the

'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action' (Little, 1991). Some of them may find this very hard to attain, particularly those who have difficulty making decisions in other areas of their lives or who find unacceptable the whole notion of taking responsibility for learning. This raises serious questions for the wholesale implementation of autonomous approaches into language programmes, and highlights the need to beware of a *'contradiction in educational terms'* (Holec, 1985) if such approaches are introduced without proper preparation and support mechanisms.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The demands autonomous language learning makes on the language teacher should not be underestimated. These involve first a good knowledge of the theoretical and practical possibilities of autonomy, and its limits. In addition, teachers need to be aware of the skills and strategies that are required for learners to become autonomous. Syllabus content and design, teaching and learning methods and assessment also must be addressed. Then there is the need for teachers to adapt to a more flexible role, that of facilitator, counsellor, supporter, adviser, as well as source and imparter of knowledge. Finally, they must be skilled at managing and organising time and resources.

From a review of the research undertaken in this area and, in particular, projects carried out over the last five years in language departments on a variety of aspects of autonomy, there is no evidence that teachers will have a lesser role in the learning of languages, though this role is certainly

changing as many seek to achieve a different balance between learner, teacher and resources. Examples of some of these projects are grouped below under key aspects of autonomy.

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

'Open learning for languages', an accredited project (level 2 student-initiated credits) at the University of Central Lancashire was set up with funding from EHE (Hurd, 1994), and ran throughout the academic year 1993-4. The final product was an induction programme for students new to autonomous language learning. It contained advice and guidance on study skills and strategies for open language learning, use of audio-visual and computerised material and a range of materials written by the students themselves for use in the University's Language Learning Centre. Students met in semester 1 with me as Project Leader and two colleagues for weekly seminars on aspects of autonomous language learning, and in semester 2 worked increasingly on their own, in pairs or threes, with staff support as required to produce the induction programme.

In their final assessed presentations students commented very positively on the project, both in terms of their satisfaction with the final product and of the transferable skills they felt they had acquired in the process. Staff too reported favourably on the personal benefits of being involved in the project, in particular the dedication and commitment to high standards shown by students and the more equal relationship that had become established between teacher and learner.

Last year, a project on 'Integrating skills in an active learning environment' (Damamme-Gilbert & Tyler, 1998) which involved the design and creation

of a departmental news sheet was set up at Birmingham University for 2nd-year students of French. The project aimed to demonstrate the range of skills that can be acquired and integrated '*within a creative active and autonomous learning environment*'. For one semester students worked in groups to create an 800-word written text or set of texts covering a range of topics, from reports, reviews and interviews to items on fashion and even an agony aunt column.

Outcomes were very positive in terms of both enjoyment and the opportunities to demonstrate a range of skills, some of these specific to the type of project (such as editing, redrafting and proof-reading of each other's scripts), others more generally transferable (such as report-writing, questionnaire design, team-working and keeping to deadlines). Students also showed great improvement in IT skills.

In terms of staff input, the findings again bore out the fact that projects involving learner autonomy do not save staff time. In this particular case, there was considerably less face-to-face teaching, but it was more than made up for by the hours spent managing the project, checking drafts, and giving general support and guidance.

Other projects and developments involving peer-teaching at Brighton University (Carpenter, 1996) and tandem learning at Sheffield University (Lewis, Woodin & St John, 1996) have also proved to be very effective in fostering autonomy through actively involving students in their own learning.

ASSESSMENT

With regard to assessment and autonomy, some interesting developments have taken place at the University of Central Lancashire (Roberts & Shaw, 1998) in which part of the final grade awarded to students on

the Institution-wide Language Programme (IWLP) comes from an assessed portfolio of work submitted by each individual student. A survey carried out in 1998 revealed that students were largely in favour of portfolio assessment, not only in terms of their language development but also for the acquisition of transferable skills such as communication, organisational, interpersonal and IT, and for qualities such as increased self-confidence and self-discipline. For the year 1998-9 it is anticipated that a third of the mark generated for portfolios will come from self-assessment by each student. Sharing some responsibility for assessment is also on the agenda at Newcastle University (Fernandez-Toro, 1998), where proposals for integrating self-awarded marks into summative as opposed to formative assessment of IWLP modules are under discussion.

INCORPORATING IT

Since 1994 face-to-face tandem learning has been available to students of modern languages at Sheffield University's Modern Language Teaching Centre. Pairs are formed

between native-speakers of different languages to give each other practice in the foreign language. In 1995 the idea of tandem learning was extended to email and a project was set up to evaluate its effectiveness (Lewis, Woodin & St John, 1996). The students taking part were briefed on the principles of tandem learning, including agreeing with their partner how to go about correcting each other's language errors, and negotiating the frequency and language of communication. Participants also attended two 30-minute sessions on using email.

Findings from the project, which ran for five months, revealed increased confidence together with greater cultural awareness. Students also appreciated the opportunities for instant correction and access to authentic language. Despite problems to do with inadequate IT skills and lack of proper planning, students were largely positive about the experience. In terms of autonomy, the researchers concluded that while '*email is an ideal tool for the autonomous learner, [...] the ability to exploit what it has to offer depends critically on the possession of sophisticated personal, social and IT*



skills'. Further proof of the need for high levels of preparation and support entailing large investments of tutor time if autonomous approaches are to be successfully implemented.

A later project (Marsh, 1997) used email and computer-mediated conferencing to reduce learner isolation and encourage peer support and was very successful in this respect. Research findings indicated that *'students tended to be more open and aware of the processes they were going through to learn the language'*, and *'appreciated the immediate feedback on their thoughts and fears on their language learning experience.'*

Pilot projects at the Open University's Centre for Modern Languages (Goodfellow and Lamy, 1998), involving student-to-student and student-to-teacher exchanges via the internet are also clearly demonstrating the potential of the internet to promote autonomy and reduce isolation.

Developments on programmes for non-specialist learners of languages which have a non-romanised writing system such as Japanese (Gilligan, 1998) are favouring use of the internet to enable students to learn complex written characters, a memorising task that can just as effectively be achieved outside class time. This use of IT can give students more autonomy in their learning, and at the same time free up the teacher to concentrate in class on the sometimes neglected but equally important socio-cultural aspects of language learning.

ETHNICITY

As our student body increases to welcome more and more students from different ethnic backgrounds, it is essential that issues raised by this increasing diversity are sensitively addressed. A study of ethnicity and the

autonomous language learner carried out at Westminster University (Press, 1996) indicated significant differences among learners, particularly in the affective domain. With regard to autonomy Press concluded that *'increasing evidence of different cultural expectations requires a more sensitive interpretation of the concept'* and that *'some students could be demotivated if expected to work without firm instructions or formal assessment coming from the teacher.'*

This study provides further evidence of the need for careful preparation of learners and teachers before any degree of autonomous learning can be successfully implemented.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNER TRAINING

The need for *'extensive staff and student preparation'* was sharply highlighted in an evaluation of a self-study system at the University of the West of England (Beeching, 1996). This underlined the findings of an earlier study of independent language learning at the University of Central Lancashire (Hurd, 1994) which indicated the need for staff development in specific areas: *'not only in materials development, but also in areas such as learner support, use and management of resources, responding appropriately to a variety of language needs, assessing progress, using and authoring computer-based activities, and many more.'*

GOOD ORAL SKILLS

One frequently cited drawback of autonomous language learning concerns the acquisition of oral skills. While writing does not require the presence of others, speaking does,

unless we refer to activities such as oral presentations and ansaphone messages. Missing from those solo activities are the two crucial features of communication: unpredictability and surprise.

It is true that autonomous learning can provide ideal opportunities for learners to work on the techniques of oral production, such as pronunciation, intonation, pausing and stress, in their own time and at their own pace. Nevertheless, even if this involves using examples on audio as models for imitation, it is very hard for a student working alone to be able adequately to assess his or her progress. Some are better than others at imitating what they hear, and learning from a comparison of their version with the model. Developing good oral techniques, even out of any meaningful context, can play an important role in boosting confidence, but it cannot help learners transfer from real as opposed to imagined spoken contexts.

These limitations only apply, of course, to those working alone. But some of the projects outlined above have demonstrated that autonomous learning does not always have to entail working in isolation. Autonomy can be fostered through activities such as tandem learning and self-help language groups, which increase the number of opportunities for authentic oral interaction, while at the same time encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning. Autonomy and social interaction are not as mutually exclusive as some might claim.

QUALITY OF AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

If autonomous learning methods do not preclude social interaction,

arguments about decreased enjoyment through lack of social interaction begin to lose their force. While opportunities for face-to-face interaction are likely to be limited for those learning at a distance, learners on campus-based universities can exercise their autonomy through seeking out every opportunity to work with others. Some researchers quite rightly stress the importance of the 'human element' in learning a language, suggesting that *'perhaps it is this human factor that distinguishes foreign language learning from other knowledge'* (Warriner-Burke, (1990). But as we have seen, autonomous methods do not automatically rule this out. There is simply a shift in the balance of responsibility for seeking out good learning opportunities, with the onus as much on learner as on teacher.

It is important to address the needs of teachers too, in particular the ways in which a move to incorporate autonomy can affect the quality of their experience in and out of the classroom. The changed role to adviser or manager of learning, the lack of spontaneous interaction, the need for specific skills

not required to the same degree in face-to-face teaching, isolation and the potential for considerable work overload are just some factors that need to be taken in to account. While some are finding ways of overcoming this, particularly through the use of technology, many still express serious reservations.

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING EQUALS EFFECTIVE LEARNING

Many of the skills which come under the general heading of autonomy, such as the ability to work independently, set your own targets and manage your time, are transferable to other contexts and therefore desirable in their own right. In the late 1990s with a workforce that is approximately 30% graduate, employers are seeking the kinds of transferable skills autonomous learning requires students to demonstrate. In encouraging an autonomous approach, we are also providing the grounds for students to develop other crucial skills, not just for the market-place but

possibly for life in general as independent, self-motivated individuals.

On the pedagogical side, there is increasing evidence to support the argument that autonomous learning can lead to better learning outcomes. Certainly for languages, those students who seek out opportunities to develop and practise their language skills in a variety of different contexts are likely to attain higher levels of language proficiency than those who do not.

The above issues are just some of those that need to be examined by those working on the implementation of autonomous approaches into their programmes. While it is clear that some issues are relevant across the board, others are specific only to certain disciplines. It is for each subject area to identify and clarify what these are, the specific problems they raise and how these can be addressed.

In helping undergraduates become more autonomous, we equip them with many of the skills, competences and qualities they need for life post-university. □

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PUBLICATION FOUR

Hurd, S., Beaven, T. and Ortega, A. (2001) Developing autonomy in a distance language learning context: issues and dilemmas for course writers. *System* 29 (3), 341-355. ISSN 0346-251X.



PERGAMON

System 29 (2001) 341–355

SYSTEM

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Developing autonomy in a distance language learning context: issues and dilemmas for course writers

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Received 25 January 2001; received in revised form 5 April 2001; accepted 18 April 2001

Abstract

The relationship between autonomy and the teaching and learning of languages at a distance is complex. On the one hand, in order to complete successfully a distance learning programme, learners need to develop a series of strategies and skills that will enable them to work individually. At the same time, distance learning programmes have a clear structure in which the amount, rate and content of the learning programme is determined by the course writers, and not by the student. If autonomy is about the learner being 'able to make significant decisions about what is to be learned, as well as how and when to do it' (Van Lier, L., 1996. *Interaction in the Language Curriculum, Awareness, Autonomy and Authenticity*. Longman, London and New York, pp. 12–13), then it would seem to be incompatible with distance learning. This paper investigates the notion of autonomy in relation to distance language learning, and examines the skills and strategies needed by those learning at a distance in order to achieve successful outcomes. It explores in particular the dilemma posed by the highly structured nature of Open University language courses and the need for learners to develop autonomous approaches. Using examples from the Spanish Diploma, it outlines ways in which autonomy can nevertheless be effectively promoted through careful attention to materials design. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Autonomy; Language learning; Distance learning; Learning strategies; Course design; Metacognition; Learning support; Self-evaluation

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates the notion of autonomy in relation to distance language learning, and examines the skills and strategies needed by those learning at a distance in order to achieve successful outcomes. It explores in particular the dilemma posed by the highly structured nature of Open University language courses and the need for learners to develop autonomous approaches. Using examples from the Spanish Diploma, the paper goes on to outline ways in which autonomy can nevertheless be promoted through careful attention to materials design.

2. The Open University context

The Centre for Modern Languages¹ was set up at the Open University (OU) in 1991 and produced its first course L120 *Ouverture* for learners of French post-GCSE in 1995, attracting around 1700 students. Since then, 3-year Diplomas have been developed in French and German, and the new 2-year Spanish Diploma will be completed for presentation in February 2001, bringing the number of students learning a language at a distance to around 6000. Plans are also in place for ab initio courses in Spanish, followed by French and German.

The OU is famed for its specially designed materials which support the learner as she or he progresses through the course, anticipating needs and difficulties, adopting a pre-emptive approach and endeavouring to equip the learner with the skills and strategies needed for learning at a distance. The philosophy of the OU is that in order to be open, there can be no assumptions about students' ability to find learning resources by accessing libraries, satellite TV, or the Internet. In order to enable all students to follow OU courses, and this includes of course students in remote rural areas, students with disabilities, or those whose personal, professional or financial circumstances prevent them from having access to outside resources (such as libraries, bookshops, etc.), the OU traditionally provides students with all the materials they need in order to complete their studies.

Success and what leads to it is a complex mixture of elements. Motivation is essential, as with it comes persistence when the going gets tough, and energy to keep studying when other commitments encroach on your time. But motivation levels can drop dramatically if the right support is not there. Equally important is the ability each student has to make the most of that support in terms of developing as a learner. This is not much different from any learning context — we all know that the teacher can teach but only the learner can learn, and this applies as much to face-to-face language learning as to learning a language at a distance. However, whereas in the classroom, good teachers can ascertain fairly rapidly whether their learners are making progress and what kind of support they might need to help them along that road, the distance learner, particularly if she or he has little contact with a teacher, must not only find out by trial and error which strategies seem to work, but

¹ Renamed the Department of Languages in September 2000.

also learn the skill of assessing personal learning needs, including strengths and weaknesses, and have some idea of how to address them and monitor progress. In order to develop these skills, learners need to be self-aware and knowledgeable about their own perceptions, attitudes and abilities.

3. Metacognition: knowledge and skills

The knowledge and skills we are talking about can both be described as metacognitive. According to Flavell (1976, p. 232) metacognitive knowledge is “the knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them” and metacognitive skills “the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes”. Chamot and O’Malley (1994, p. 372) suggest that on the basis of information to date,

metacognition [...] may be the major factor in determining the effectiveness of individuals’ attempts to learn another language and that conclusions about strategic differences between good and bad language learners appear to suggest that explicit metacognitive knowledge about task characteristics and appropriate strategies for task solution is a major determiner of language learning effectiveness.

Metacognitive knowledge is also centrally involved in monitoring, which Wenden (1999, p. 437) describes as “the regulatory skill that oversees the learning process that follows the initial planning. It is the basis for determining how one is progressing, and it is what constitutes the internal feedback i.e. the state of awareness which lets the learner know that he/she has encountered a problem”. The essential link between metacognition and strategic competence is elaborated by Bachman and Palmer (1996) quoted in Cohen (1998, p. 14) who describe strategic competence as “a set of metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher-order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use”.

Those unaccustomed to reflection in any aspect of their lives, may find it difficult to accept this link between self-awareness, strategic competence and effective learning, and may well resist it if they are not convinced of the so-called benefits and relevance to themselves as individual learners. Most language learners want to get on with it, to see rapid results. They are prepared to work hard, but may need some convincing that effective learning is not just about following instructions from teacher or book and doing exercises, (even if you do get the answers right).

4. Autonomy: individual and social aspects

Metacognitive knowledge, strategic competence and reflection are all aspects of autonomy and refer to explicit intervention by the learner in her or his learning. Wenden (1991, p. 15) gives a clear statement on autonomy and its relation to

successful learning: “In effect, *successful* or *expert* or *intelligent* learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous”. In fact there is now an overwhelming consensus among researchers in the field of language learning and teaching (Holec, 1981; Riley, 1985; Little, 1991; Dickinson, 1992) of the benefits of an autonomous approach. As Phil Benson (1996, p. 28) states: “the concept of autonomy is indeed beginning to enter the mainstream of language learning methodology”, though he does warn that “we must recognise that, so far, we have no theory of autonomous language learning”, and that “its application in the field of language learning is highly problematic”.

The relationship between autonomy and the teaching and learning of languages at a distance is particularly complex. In order to complete successfully a distance-learning programme, learners have to maintain their motivation while working alone and develop a series of strategies and skills that will enable them to work individually. At the same time, distance learning is not the same as open learning or self-access, and distance learning programmes such as those offered by the Department of Languages at the Open University have a very rigid structure in which the amount, rate and content of the learning programme is determined by the course team in charge of producing the materials, and not by the student. If autonomy is about the learner being “able to make significant decisions about what is to be learned, as well as how and when to do it” (Van Lier, 1996, pp. 12–13), then it would seem that highly directed learning programmes such as those developed at the OU cannot promote autonomy, as the elements of choice and decision-making on the part of the student would seem to be almost non-existent. How can we reconcile two notions clearly at opposite ends of the spectrum: learner autonomy and very structured and rigid instructional programmes? The key to this lies in the quality of the learning materials, the approach learners adopt towards these materials and the skills and strategies they already have at their disposal or succeed in developing as they progress through the course.

5. Learning strategies, strategic competence and effective language learning

Going back to Wenden’s contention that autonomous learners have acquired the knowledge and strategies that enable them to learn effectively, we need to look in more detail at definitions and classifications of learning strategies and possible links both to metacognitive knowledge as described earlier, and to learning outcomes.

All strategies have their place in learning and there is general agreement among leading researchers in the field (Brown and Palinscar, 1982; Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990; Ridley, 1997) in support of the claim made by O’Malley and Chamot (1993, p. 105) that “individuals who take a more strategic approach learn more rapidly and effectively than individuals who do not...”. Cohen maintains that “the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from those processes that are not strategic” (1998, p. 4) and goes on to describe language learner strategies

as constituting “the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both” (p. 5). Cohen is here making a useful distinction between language learning and language use strategies. Chamot and O’Malley (1994, p. 371) contrast learner strategies which “identify those (strategies) that students have developed on their own to solve language learning problems” with learning strategies which they use to describe “those (the strategies) that have been (or could be) taught, explicitly as part of instruction”. Learning strategies for them are “always an explicit process in language learning”, whereas learner strategies “may be explicit or implicit, depending on the degree of awareness with which the individual employs them” (pp. 371–372). Oxford (1990, p. 1) supports the involvement of self in defining strategies, considering them as “especially important for language learning, because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement”, and adds that, if used appropriately, they “result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence”. Conscious selection and self-directed involvement, both features of strategies as described above, are also characteristics of an autonomous approach, and of general relevance in particular to the needs of those learning in independent contexts.

Learning strategies vary widely, however, and do not automatically divide up into distinct categories, hence the efforts by many researchers (Naiman et al., 1978; O’Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991) to differentiate them in order to understand better their role in language learning and how they can best be taught and transferred. Chamot and O’Malley, 1994; O’Malley and Chamot, 1990) classify strategies under three main headings: cognitive (applying a specific technique to a particular task, for example repetition, deductive reasoning, retrieval and rehearsal), metacognitive (executive processes used to plan, monitor and evaluate a learning task) and socio-affective (interacting with others for practice or to combat isolation or anxiety). They give a special emphasis to those classed as metacognitive, maintaining that “students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions” (1990, p. 8, p. 216).

Whatever the individual context, each learner, ideally with the help of a tutor, has to find a way through the learning process, developing strategies which will suit her or his needs. This poses particular problems for distance course writers and tutors because there are few if any opportunities to ‘get at’ learners and find out about them. Given that not all attend tutorials or dayschools, and some have grounds for excusal from Summer School, we cannot rely on these contexts to communicate with them and seek their views. Questionnaires and recorded interviews or focus groups seem to be the most appropriate methods, despite their inherently problematic nature, relying as they do on self-report mechanisms which may give a varying picture. But, as Cotterall maintains, they do give “useful indicators of group norms” (Cotterall, 1999, p. 507), and certainly have their place along with other research instruments. A study of learners following the third-stage and final course of the OU French Diploma *L210: Mises au point* in 1998 (OU, 1997), using questionnaires and focus group discussions, provided useful data on student attitudes to learner support, factors perceived by learners to be relevant to successful

distance language learning and, in particular, the strategies students actually use to improve their language learning.²

Apart from the work of White (1999) and Hurd, there seems to be very little recent research published relating to the particular situation of *distance language* learners. While much of the classroom-based research on metacognition, autonomy and strategic competence applies to language learners in all contexts, the special circumstances of distance language learners need particular attention. At the Open University, our Institute for Educational Technology can give us data on certain variables, for example, educational background and previous learning experience, age and gender. But it is much more difficult to get information on a whole range of personal learner characteristics which have a crucial effect on language learning: aptitude and attitude, concepts, assumptions and beliefs, which in turn affect learning style, which itself, as many researchers in the field maintain, affects choice of learning strategy.

What emerges is a complex picture of learners collectively embracing a multitude of cognitive and affective variables, some of which we can know and act on, others which we can only guess at, and all of which have an impact on language learning to a greater or lesser degree. Moreover, with regard to training, Rees-Miller (1993), quoted in Cohen (1998, p. 108), suggests that:

the stage the learners are at in the learning process, their language proficiency at that stage, the educational background that they have, their beliefs about language learning and the beliefs of their teachers, their varying cognitive styles, and any cultural differences that exist across learners all complicate the implementation of learner training.

6. Promoting autonomy through learner or strategy training: the OU Spanish model

For distance language learning, learner or strategy training is clearly an area where there are more questions than answers. As we cannot assume tutorial attendance, we are left with two main possibilities, training via the materials and/or through tutor feedback. Choices then have to be made as to whether the training should be implicit, embedded and contextualised or explicit, interventionist and decontextualised, whether it should be devised to fit learner type or learning task; and of course there are also all the presentational aspects, including language of discourse and length of rubrics, use of metalanguage, avoidance of patronising tone, and general design issues. Ellis (1985, p. 188) sums up the situation neatly: ‘Peering into the *black box* to identify the different learner strategies at work in SLA is rather like stumbling blindfold around a room to find a hidden object [. . .] The mapping of strategies into a tight conceptual framework is bound to be arbitrary to some

² Full details of this study appear in an article entitled ‘Distance language learners and learner support: beliefs, difficulties and use of strategies’ in *Links and Letters* 7, 61–80, 2000.

extent". The advantage of contextualised strategy training is that "learners can develop their learning strategy repertoires while learning the target language at the same time" (Cohen, 1998, p. 80). On the other hand, developing the knowledge and skills that make up strategic competence, particularly use of metacognitive strategies is more likely to come about through decontextualised methods. As Skehan says: "We would expect the metacognitive strategies to transfer more readily than the cognitive strategies" (1989, p. 91). Finally, there are questions of focus, placing and implementation: do you build strategies around existing course materials or start with the strategies and build the materials around them?

The OU language courses do make some attempt at strategy development, largely contextualised through, for example, in the third-stage French course, *L210: Mises au point*, the *dossier* sections which give ideas for strategies to improve language learning, and the *boîtes à idées* which give opportunities for further practice. Study skills and learning strategies are also given space in some of the Language course guides. The *Language Learner's Good Study Guide* (OU, 1995) is another good source of information on many aspects of effective language learning.

Building on the French and German experience, the Diploma in Spanish has gone a great deal further in promoting autonomy through the development of learning strategies contextualised within the materials, and deserves a more detailed examination. Following on from a Certificate which takes students from ab initio to lower-intermediate level, the Diploma is made up of two full credit courses, as shown in Fig. 1.

The production of an OU language course takes 3 years and includes the following stages:

1. Writing a preliminary draft syllabus, with functions, topics and linguistic elements to be studied.
2. Drawing up the specifications of the audio-visual materials, prepared by the academic team and closely discussed with the editorial team in charge of the technical part of the project at the BBC.
3. Gathering of authentic audio-visual resources in the target countries.
4. Editing the video resources and the preselection of suitable audio resources.
5. Producing a refined version of the syllabus, based on the linguistic exponents present in the audio-visual materials gathered.
6. Writing the course-books, and reviewing drafts by the course team.
7. Producing activities on CDs (which include extracts of authentic audio and scripted activities recorded in the studio).
8. Editing the written materials (involves editorial queries to academic team, production of artwork, book design and printing).
9. Producing an assessment strategy and assessment materials for the course.

Since the production of a course is such a complex process, and has huge resource implications, once the course is written, it will undergo no or very few changes for the duration of its life, which is between 6 and 10 years.

The highly rigid and structured format of OU language courses appears to leave little room for promoting learner autonomy. Within the way courses are currently

	L204 Viento en popa	L314 A buen puerto
Level	University level 2 Threshold level ³	University level 3 Vantage level ⁴
Hours of study	440 hour course 13 hours/week	440 hour course 13 hours/week
Tutorials	21 hours per course	21 hours per course
Residential school	1 week residential school	No obligatory residential school
Assessment	Continuous monthly assessment and exam	Continuous monthly assessment (includes a project) and exam

Fig. 1. The structure of the OU Diploma in Spanish.

³ This is the B1 level of the Council of Europe Framework, which is the first level in the *Independent User* category. At this level students 'can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.; can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken; can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest; can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.' (Council of Europe, 1998).

⁴ This is the B2 level of the Council of Europe Framework, and is the second level in the *Independent User* category. At this level students 'can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation; can interact with a degree of fluency or spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain to either party; can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options'. (Council of Europe, 1998).

presented: (1) students cannot negotiate the syllabus to fit their own linguistic needs; (2) they have little choice as to what to learn, in that they are expected to cover all the course materials, and the course assumes that all students follow the same path; (3) they cannot easily work at their own pace, as they have to complete their monthly assignments (and therefore cover the preceding units) by a specified cut-off date; (4) they are not encouraged to take their own initiative and do their own research, i.e. the assumption is that they use only the materials provided by the OU as part of the course.

So, the question can reasonably be posed: how can a rigidly structured course such as the Spanish Diploma and the notion of autonomy be reconciled in any useful and meaningful way? One solution to this dilemma is to be found in the work of Van Lier (1996, p. 21) who contends that:

the language curriculum — and any syllabus enabling it — provides structure to the students' learning world. This structure [...] has two sides to it [...]. On the one hand the structure limits or constrains the kind of things that can be done, and on the other it provides opportunities and resources for doing things.

The aim of the Course Team in producing the Spanish Diploma has been precisely to turn those constraints and limitations imposed by a distance teaching and learning medium into opportunities for students. In becoming aware of the medium's constraints, the writers have been forced to revise thoroughly current methodology in order to maximise what the medium can offer.

First of all and most importantly, each course book, which covers four study weeks, contains comprehensive study charts in which the learning objectives are clearly indicated, together with the content, timing and materials for each activity. The aim of the study charts is not only to inform students of what lies ahead, and to allow them to plan their work, but it is also a means of enabling students to make the materials their own, to achieve ownership of the syllabus. By knowing what comes next, students can decide for themselves the relevance and relative difficulty of the materials, and decide how much time and effort they will devote to the learning unit (Figs. 2 and 3).

Once the students embark on their studies, they are guided to a number of features they will encounter throughout the course. One of them relates to that important element of autonomy already mentioned: learner training. As Little (1994, p. 86) suggests: "It is essential to the development of autonomy that learners become aware of themselves as learners — aware, for example, of the learning techniques they instinctively favour and capable of judging how effective those techniques are". A number of practical solutions have been adopted to make learners aware of their own language learning techniques. Firstly, a general introduction to learning strategies and study skills in the form of the previously mentioned *Language Learner's Good Study Guide*, which all language students receive at the beginning of the course and can refer to during their studies; and secondly, in the belief that advice about learning strategies is best presented as and when it is needed to solve specific learning

<p>Unidad 2 Sueños de ayer y de hoy</p> <p>En esta unidad va a informarse sobre la Revolución cubana, su pasado, presente y futuro.</p>
<p>Learning objectives By the end of this <i>unidad</i> you should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • justify an action; • construct an argument; • refer to past and future dreams and expectations; • recognize some features of spoken language; • report past events using journalistic style.

Fig. 2. Example of Unit Introduction and Learning objectives, L204 *Viento en popa*, Book 7, Open University (2000).

SESIÓN 1 1h 45			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary relating to Spanish history • Locating in the past: time expressions and dates • Narrating in the past: the present historic
Activity	Description	Materials	
1.1	Reading: introduction to Spanish history; time expressions	Activities CD	
1.2	Listening: origins of the acueducto; the present historic tense		
1.3	Dictionary skills	Monolingual dictionary	

Fig. 3. Example of Study Chart, from L204 *Viento en popa*, Book 1, Open University (2000).

difficulties, learner training techniques are included as and when appropriate. Therefore, learner training does not take place in a vacuum, but specific strategies are presented at specific times in order to address particular difficulties, thus providing students with practical and focused advice at regular intervals. Learners are, for example, presented at one stage with different ways of recording vocabulary or taking notes, and encouraged to experiment until they find a way that works for them (Fig. 4).

A third feature which is intended to help students to become more aware of how they learn and what works best for them is the learner diary, *Diario*. In the Spanish Certificate, and in the first course of the Diploma, learners are encouraged to comment on these aspects of their learning in their *Diario*, which also serves as a vocabulary and notebook (Fig. 5).

There is also a section at the end of most sessions, called *Más práctica*, in which, like the French *boîtes à idées*, students are presented with opportunities for further practice. This is an optional activity, and is designed to enable those students who feel they need further practice in one of the points covered in the unit (Fig. 6).

Some of the *Más práctica* sections, as well as a number of other activities in the materials, also provide students with an opportunity to transfer what they have learned to other contexts, which are often more personal ones, related to the students' own experience. As Little (1991, p. 4) points out, this transferral of what has been learned to wider contexts is one of the ways in which "the capacity for autonomy [is] displayed".

Two other and closely related aspects of learner autonomy, as Nunan among others has shown (Nunan et al. in Cotterall and Crabbe 1999, p. 77), are self-monitoring and self-assessment. In the OU Spanish Diploma, students are encouraged

Listening through noise

We can often have problems understanding someone because of background noise. When this is the case, we have to listen for the gist of what is being said. We might, also, without realizing it, predict what will be said next. The video you have just watched is a good example of this. It is a good idea to practise 'predicting' what comes next in any activity involving listening.

Fig. 4. Example of strategy, from L204 *Viento en popa*, Book 2, Open University (2000).

What did you think of Actividad 1.8? Make some notes on your reactions to the activity in your *Diario*. If you keep a record of your impressions and difficulties, and try to think about how you can solve any problems you may be having, you will be able to monitor your progress more effectively.

Tome notas en su Diario sobre sus reacciones a la Actividad 1.8. Anote sus impresiones y sus dificultades.

Fig. 5. Example of *Diario*, from L140 *En rumbo*, Book 1, Open University (1999).

Más práctica
 Piense en la última vez que su jefe o jefa hizo una evaluación de su trabajo y escriba lo que le dijo.
Think of the last time that you had an appraisal with your boss or line manager and write down what he or she said.

Fig. 6. Example of *Más práctica*, from L204 *Viento en popa*, Book 4, Open University (2000).

to develop these skills through making full use of the following: (1) the key to all activities which includes model answers (written or spoken) where appropriate, so that they can assess their performance against the given model, (2) regular activities in which they are asked to correct errors in a piece of writing. These range from spelling and punctuation to factual, grammatical or syntactical errors, and are designed to encourage the development of good editing and self-correction skills; (3) opportunities for self-evaluation, both in the writing skills sessions and in the task students do as part of their revision sessions. Once they have completed their piece, students can consult a task-specific list of pointers to enable them to evaluate their piece and work on a new, improved version. They can also, if they wish, complete a self-evaluation form in which they reflect on their achievements and difficulties and which they submit with their assignment; (4) opportunities for self-evaluation in the form of self-assessment, which is part of the assessment strategy of the first Diploma course (Fig. 7).

The final element we have incorporated to develop autonomy is a language awareness component. Language awareness activities, which we call *Pensándolo bien*, ask students to think about a range of issues, from the use of a particular tense or structure in a given sentence or passage, to the choice of vocabulary or register in a particular text, or the characteristics of a particular text type or discourse. The aim is to relate the specific point being discussed in the particular activity to what the students already know or can work out by guided reflection, thus enabling them to make connections with aspects of the language previously covered, or with their knowledge of their own language. It is an attempt, as Little (1994, p. 82) contends, to enable students to “bring their existing knowledge to bear on each new learning task”. The element of self-discovery which is then explicitly presented in the subsequent section, is also designed to increase motivation, as it encourages students to relate grammatical or linguistic teaching texts in the course book to specific instances of language, and to what they already know. It is another way of enabling them to establish ownership of the materials (Fig. 8).

<p>Autoevaluación</p> <p>(a) Contenido y estructura (Content and structure)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ¿Ha utilizado el formato de carta adecuado? (<i>Did you use the appropriate format for letter writing?</i>) • ¿Tiene su carta una estructura clara según el guión que se le dio en el paso anterior? (<i>Does your letter have a clear structure, similar to the model given to you in the previous step of the activity?</i>) • ¿Se ha asegurado de que su punto de vista y postura con respecto a lo que sucedió quedan expuestos de modo eficaz? (<i>Are you satisfied that your point of view in relation to the events is clearly expressed?</i>) • ¿Ha expresado su valoración personal del espacio radiofónico <i>La radio de Julia</i>? (<i>Did you give your personal evaluation of the radio programme La radio de Julia?</i>) • Al leer esta carta, ¿no quedan dudas respecto a lo que usted opina sobre el tema y lo que ocurrió? (<i>For anyone reading this letter, are your opinions and the events that took place clear?</i>) <p>(b) Uso del lenguaje (Use of language)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ¿Ha utilizado las fórmulas de cortesía adecuadas para empezar y terminar la carta? (<i>Did you use the appropriate formulae to start and finish a letter of this type?</i>) • ¿Ha expuesto los hechos que ocurrieron de forma concisa y clara utilizando el pretérito indefinido? (<i>Did you refer to the events that took place in a concise and clear way, using the preterite?</i>) • ¿Ha explicado en lenguaje sencillo y directo el por qué del enfado del oyente? (<i>Did you express in simple and direct language the reason for the listener's angry reaction?</i>) • ¿Ha utilizado el estilo indirecto para contar lo que se dijo y quién lo dijo? (<i>Did you use indirect speech to report what other people said?</i>) • ¿Ha utilizado una variedad de estructuras para indicar su opinión? (<i>Did you use a variety of structures to express opinion?</i>) • ¿Se ha acordado de reaccionar a los puntos de vista de otros mostrando acuerdo o desacuerdo con ellos? (<i>Did you remember to react to other people's opinions showing agreement or disagreement?</i>) • ¿Ha sabido mostrar su convicción utilizando expresiones de opinión enfáticas? (<i>Were you able to show your conviction using emphatic expressions of opinion?</i>) <p>(c) Estilo (Style)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ¿Ha utilizado las convenciones de este tipo de carta? (<i>Did you follow the conventions of this type of letter?</i>) • ¿Ha utilizado el registro adecuado para este tipo de carta? (<i>Did you use the appropriate register for this type of letter?</i>) • ¿Ha organizado las ideas en párrafos coherentes? (<i>Did you organise your ideas in paragraphs?</i>)

Fig. 7. Example of Autoevaluación, from L204 *Viento en popa*, Book 6, Open University (2000).

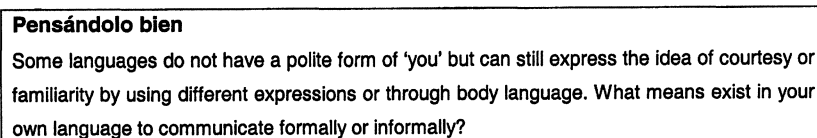


Fig. 8. Example of Pensándolo bien, from L204 *Viento en popa*, Book 2, Open University (2000).

To summarise, the following are the elements used in the OU distance-learning Diploma in Spanish to promote learner autonomy:

1. Objectives clearly explained so that students can feel they have ownership of the syllabus, and so they can plan their learning.
2. The possibility of doing further work on areas of specific difficulty — individualised homework.
3. Activities or tasks that enable students to transfer what they have learned to other contexts (in particular to contexts that are relevant to their own needs and interests).
4. Learner training that is specific enough to enable students to solve specific problems whenever and wherever they appear. Constant and varied suggestions for learning strategies so students can experiment and find those that work best for them.
5. Opportunities for students to think about how they learn — in the form of a learning diary.
6. Opportunities for self-evaluation and self-assessment, both through course activities and tasks, and through the formal assessment strategy.
7. Opportunities for students to relate what they are learning to what they already know, in the form of language awareness activities.

All the above elements have been developed as a way of promoting autonomy within the not inconsiderable constraints of working within a rigid syllabus and within a distance teaching and learning setting which is not as flexible as face-to-face teaching. The limitations of this medium have forced us to rethink our methodology and reassess how we teach. We do, however, firmly believe that the principles outlined in this paper are examples of good practice that are as relevant in distance learning as they are in the face-to-face context. Indeed, when developing materials for our face-to-face residential schools, we have used many of the above-mentioned elements. Feedback from students indicates that they believe their learning experience in the face-to-face context has been much enhanced because of the methodology we have used.

7. Conclusion

There are many ways in which autonomy can be promoted through strategy development or learner training, but most of the examples available are applicable only or mostly to the classroom, and while much of the good practice in distance

learning can be transferred to face-to-face contexts, the reverse is not generally the case. This paper has given some insight into the special situation of the distance language learner, and the inherent difficulties of providing for the needs of students one may never see and about whom little may be known. The examples from the Spanish Diploma demonstrate how an awareness on the part of course writers of specific aspects of autonomy, such as the ability to organise and reflect on learning, monitor progress, identify gaps and solve problems, can be a strong basis for targeted activities designed to promote such skills, and which can be built into the course materials. More detailed research needs to be carried out to evaluate such activities in terms of their individual effectiveness in improving language learning at a distance, and to enable a typology of such tasks to be drawn up for more universal application in the distance language-learning context.

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PUBLICATION FIVE

Hurd, S. (2005a) Autonomy and the distance language learner. In B. Holmberg, M. Shelley and C. White (eds) *Distance Education and Languages: Evolution and Change* (pp. 1-19). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. ISBN 1-85359-776-7.

Chapter 1

Autonomy and the Distance Language Learner

STELLA HURD

Introduction

Autonomy is a multidimensional concept now firmly rooted in mainstream literature and practice relating to language learning and teaching. However, while there are a number of theoretical descriptions of autonomous language learning, a single, universal theory has yet to emerge. The implications for a theory of autonomy are arguably even more complex in the case of distance language learning, where highly structured course materials and fixed assessment points would appear to run counter to notions of choice and responsibility. Taking as its point of reference the experience of distance language learning at the Open University (UK), this chapter examines the various dimensions of autonomy, in particular its relationship with affective aspects of learner differences and with metacognition. In conclusion, the chapter looks ahead to the potential of new technologies to create learning communities in which autonomy is promoted through social interaction, learner empowerment and reflection.

Interpretations of Autonomy

Despite the proliferation of research and publications over the last two decades, autonomy is a concept that remains elusive, particularly in relation to language learning and teaching. First, there are questions to do with definition, degree and application. Is it the 'ability to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning' (Holec, 1981: 3) or is it a 'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991: 4)? Is it an attribute that signifies 'organic independence' (OED online) or does it also imply interdependence? Does it entail complete freedom and responsibility?

ity on the part of learners, or does it come with constraints? Is it something that can be taught, or even imposed on learners, or is this a 'contradiction in educational terms' (Holec, 1985: 169)? There are also important issues to do with the role and timing of autonomy in learning. Is it a precondition for successful learning or an outcome of certain modes of learning, for example self-instruction?

Definitions

While there are no easy answers to any of these questions, there does appear to be almost universal acceptance of the development of autonomy as an 'important, general educational goal' (Sinclair, 2000: 5), and that autonomy can take a variety of different forms depending on learning context and learner characteristics. Where there are differences, it is not always a question of favouring one definition or interpretation over another. For example, the 'capacity' of Little and the 'ability' or 'skill' of Holec are not opposing constructs. Benson (2001: 49) argues that 'Little's definition is complementary to Holec's', in that it makes explicit the cognitive processes underlying effective self-management of learning, and thus adds 'a vital psychological dimension that is often absent in definitions of autonomy'. Benson (2001: 47) prefers to use the term 'control' over learning, because such a construct allows for easier examination than 'charge' or 'responsibility'. Others define autonomy in terms of what it entails or implies, hence, 'self-regulation' (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998; Wenden, 2001) or 'self-direction' (Candy, 1991; White, 1999). Another approach is to describe what autonomy is not (Little, 1991). The main priority, according to Benson (2001: 48) is 'that we are able to identify the form in which we choose to recognize it in the contexts of our own research and practice'.

Social interaction, interdependence and reflection

The psychological dimension of autonomy has attracted a great deal of attention over the last decade, largely as a result of renewed interest in the work of the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky and his emphasis on interdependence in learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), we do not learn in isolation, but through our interactions with others. His 'zone of proximal development' is the gap between what learners can achieve on their own and what they can achieve in collaboration with others. Both Kohonen (1992) and Little (1996) view the idea of collaborative learning through social interaction as essential for the reflective and analytic capacity that is central to autonomy. Kohonen's (1992) experiential language learning model, based on Kolbian experiential learning principles, involves a cyclical process moving through concrete experience,

reflection, abstract conceptualisation and action. The reflective (inner) process interplays with the experiential and active (social) processes to bring about deeper awareness of the self in relation to language learning. Collaboration with others through sharing the insights of reflection can enhance knowledge and lead to deeper understanding. Little (1996: 211), in line with Vygotskian thinking, also claims that 'the development of a capacity for reflection and analysis [. . .] depends on the internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions'.

For some, the social, human element is seen to have particular significance for language learning. Warriner-Burke (1990: 131) maintains that 'many experienced foreign language professionals think that language and language learning are deeply human experiences' and that 'perhaps it is this human factor that distinguishes foreign language learning from other knowledge . . . '. Little's view (2001: 32), however, is that learning is the product of a complex interplay between both social and reflective processes and warns that 'in stressing the importance of the social-interactive dimension [. . .], it is important not to underplay the importance of the individual-cognitive dimension'. He cites Ackermann (1996: 32) who states that, 'without connection people cannot grow, yet without separation they cannot relate' and talks of learning as 'a dance between diving in and stepping out' (1996: 32). In other words, reflection (stepping out) is as important as social interaction (diving in) for cognitive development and autonomy.

Developing reflection

Reflection is thus an integral part of the process of exercising autonomy, yet for most learners it does not come naturally and needs to be developed. Strategy or learner training programmes, either embedded in the materials or as stand-alone elements, can be effective. However, language 'advising' or 'counselling' is becoming a more widespread and popular option in universities in the UK operating self-access language learning systems (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). Following an individual needs analysis, the student is shown over a period of time how to develop awareness and reflect on learning through the use of learning logs or diaries, given advice on strategy use, and encouraged to engage in self-evaluation as part of control over learning.

In some institutions teachers take on a timetabled adviser role; in others the advisory service is a separate unit operating in conjunction with teachers. Whatever the particular organisational structure, the shift in the locus of control from teacher to learner, which is central to an autonomous approach, involves a profound change in role, and can bring feelings of

insecurity, uncertainty and discomfort (Little, 1995). Nevertheless, teachers in all educational contexts are the human interface between learners and resources and cannot therefore expect or help their learners to develop a capacity for critical reflection unless they have this capacity themselves. In this sense, learner autonomy is dependent on teacher autonomy. In a distance context, the challenges may be greater and the problems intensified, as the social interaction or 'pedagogical dialogue' Little (1995) regards as the 'decisive factor' in the development of learner autonomy can be infinitely more difficult to achieve. Dialogue can to a certain extent be promoted through the materials, but it is perhaps tutor feedback, paper-based or online, that can best create the conditions for learners to become good critical reflectors and develop self-management strategies. But what are the assumptions behind the nature and timing of autonomy within language learning?

Prerequisite or outcome?

Is autonomy a precondition for successful language learning, or a product or goal that emerges from learner exposure to certain contextual influences in language learning? Benson (2001: 9) highlights a common assumption among those working in self-access centres that 'self-access work will automatically lead to autonomy', and, from the producers of self-instructional and distance learning materials, that 'autonomy will be one outcome of these modes of learning'. These are false assumptions if applied generally. As argued in Hurd (1998a: 72–3), '[...] if learners are not trained for autonomy, no amount of surrounding them with resources will foster in them that capacity for active involvement and conscious choice, although it might appear to do so'. Little (2001: 34) also maintains that 'the pursuit of autonomy in formal learning environments must entail explicit conscious processes; otherwise we leave its development to chance'. Some studies into distance learning (Hurd, 2000b; White, 1995, 1999) have cited the importance of the context itself as a key factor in the development of autonomy in the learner: 'A self-instruction context for learning does not automatically equate with learner autonomy, but autonomy may arise and develop within the learner as a response to the specific demands of a self-instruction context' (White, 1995: 209). The distance learning context requires a certain degree of autonomy in order for a learner to function at all, which ties in well with Little's assertion (2001: 35) that 'essentially, the only way of becoming autonomous is to be autonomous'. The British Open University has over 30 years of experience in addressing these issues. How does it structure its materials and support for language learners?

Open and Distance Language Learning at the Open University (UK)

In the 1980s, Holmberg's idea of distance learning as a 'guided didactic conversation' in which a relationship is established to 'involve the student emotionally so that he or she takes a personal interest in the subject and its problems' (Holmberg, 1983: 117) became widely accepted as a basis for writing materials for distance learners. Specially written open and distance materials play a central role in all OU courses as the *teaching voice*, the link between teacher and learner. In other words, they carry out all the functions of a teacher in a more conventional setting. Derek Rowntree (1990: 11) sums these up as: 'guiding, motivating, intriguing, expounding, explaining, provoking, reminding, asking questions, discussing alternative answers, appraising each learner's progress, and giving appropriate remedial help'. Particular attention is paid to the design of print materials, both academic and visual, so that they are easy to follow and attractive to work with. Any audio-visual input is carefully researched, designed and produced to work with the other materials, so that the overall course is an integrated whole. A structured and supported approach ensures that students know what they are expected to do and at what point. In OU language courses, each activity or sequence of activities is introduced by an 'organiser' that gives a brief rationale for each activity or activities. This is designed to help students understand why they are being invited to take part in particular activities and how these fit into the wider structure, so that they can become more aware of the language learning process, begin to set their own goals and learn to monitor their own progress.

Courses, students and materials

The Centre for Modern Languages at the Open University (OU), renamed the Department of Languages in 1999, was set up in 1991 and offers a Diploma in French, German or Spanish that students may count towards a BA or BSc Open degree or one of the named degrees in Modern Language Studies, Humanities, European Studies or International Studies. There are around 7000 students registered on one or more of the 13 language courses currently available, making the OU the biggest language provider in the UK university sector. Since November 2003, students have also been able to study at beginners' level. A beginners' course plus the next stage together make up the Certificate at Level 1.

Students register from all parts of the UK and from Continental Western Europe (CWE). The typical distance language learner at the OU is in the 35–50 age range, in work and with family commitments. The University is 'open' in that there are no prerequisites to courses. Students may, if they

wish, take advantage of the Self-Assessment Tests offered in all three languages, to help them determine their level of proficiency. Course materials include course books and recorded video, audio and CD extracts. There are also print support materials in the form of course and study guides, transcripts, study charts and supplementary notes, and a web-based guide to OU study containing general information and study tips. Assessment consists of Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs), some formative, that assess both written and oral skills, and are submitted on a regular basis to the tutor for marking and feedback. On some courses there are also Student Marked Assignments (SMAs), which allow learners to assess grammatical and semantic knowledge themselves as they progress through the course. Detailed feedback is given to help students understand and correct their mistakes, analyse and address more serious errors, and develop the skills of self-correction and self-monitoring. A two-part written and oral examination completes the assessment for the year.

Learner support

For those who choose or have no option but to study at a distance the demands are great: 'distance learners must regulate and oversee the rate and direction of their learning to a much greater degree than classroom learners' (White, 1994: 12–13). But support is available to those who want it. First, there is Student Services, a dedicated unit that operates in all the 13 OU regional centres across the UK, using staff trained to advise on a range of issues concerning academic study. Second, each student is assigned to a designated tutor in their region, who can be contacted at agreed times for advice, and who conducts regular tutorials and the occasional dayschool at one of the regional centres. Tutorials are optional and are conducted either face-to-face, online or by telephone, depending on the particular course and personal circumstances of individual students.

In such a highly structured set-up it is reasonable to ask if autonomy has any role to play at all. Hurd *et al.* (2001: 344) raise just this question: 'How can we reconcile two notions clearly at opposite ends of the spectrum: learner autonomy and highly structured and rigid instructional programmes?' The solution adopted by the OU is 'to turn those constraints and limitations imposed by a distance teaching and learning medium into opportunities for students' (2001: 349). This is achieved by taking specific aspects of autonomy and building them into activities in the course materials. Thus students are offered activities to promote reflection, to self-assess and monitor progress, to identify gaps and solve problems. They are also provided with examples of how to transfer the knowledge and skills they have acquired to other contexts, which, as Little (1991: 4) maintains, is one of the ways in which the capacity for autonomy is

displayed. The contention is that even in such a structured and supported mode of learning, autonomy can be promoted through specially designed materials, which are varied and flexible enough to cater for a range of learner differences.

Individual Differences: Affective Factors and their Impact on Autonomy

Individual differences refer to the different factors or variables that characterise learners, such as age, gender, aptitude, intelligence, personality, learning style and previous learning experience. Learners also come to learning with their own individual beliefs, attitudes, expectations, anxieties, motivations and strategies. Whether classified as cognitive or affective, such variables are generally considered to have some bearing on the ways in which a learner is likely to interpret, relate and respond to the learning materials.

For the distance language learner, it is perhaps affective variables – beliefs, motivation and anxiety – that are of greater relevance, because their effect on learning may be intensified in an independent context, and because of their capacity for modification and change. According to Oxford (1990: 140), ‘the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure’. Results from studies carried out with undergraduate language learners in the late 1990s into affect in language learning have supported ‘substantial links among affective measures and achievement’ (Gardner *et al.*, 1997: 344).

Beliefs and expectations

According to Cotterall (1995: 195) and many others writing in the field, learner beliefs are said to have a profound influence on the learning behaviour of language learners. She argues further that ‘the beliefs learners hold may either contribute to or impede the development of their potential for autonomy’ (1995: 196), thus making explicit a link between beliefs and autonomy. Her view is that through investigating learner beliefs, teachers can assess learners’ ‘readiness’ for autonomy and give appropriate support. White (1999: 444), in writing about distance language learners, makes a similar point: ‘attention to expectations and beliefs can contribute to our understanding of the realities of the early stages of self-instruction in language’.

The growing cultural diversity among distance learners has prompted a closer look at the nature and extent of cultural influences on beliefs and expectations with regard to language learning. Culture is said to influence both the learning process and its outcomes (Dunn & Griggs, 1995) and cul-

tural behaviour is 'always and inevitably culturally conditioned' (Little, 2002: 3). While there is evidence to suggest that the idea of autonomy as an educational goal is shared by diverse cultures (Aoki & Smith, 1999; Yang, 1999), it is important to recognise that the emphasis on an autonomous approach may be inappropriate for those whose cultural background brings with it expectations of language learning in which the teacher has sole responsibility for directing learning activities, setting goals, assessing work and measuring progress. In China, for example, the idea of self-management is at odds with the philosophy of learning that is deeply rooted in Chinese culture (Hurd & Xiao, 2003). The risk of cultural inappropriateness, or worse, the charge of cultural imperialism, through attempting to impose Western practices on other cultures, has to be taken seriously and addressed sensitively.

Researchers into the effects of cultural difference (Dunn & Griggs, 1995; Horwitz, 1999; Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998), while underlining the importance of understanding the beliefs and values of different ethnic groups, nevertheless argue that in addressing cultural difference we should not lose sight of the individual differences to be found in all cultural groups. Horwitz' (1999: 575) study finds that 'within-group differences' are likely to account for as much variation as the 'cultural differences' and that 'there is not strong evidence for a conclusion of cultural differences in learner beliefs' (1999: 576). Sanchez and Gunawardena (1998) maintain that while it is important not to make generalisations about individuals based on evidence from particular culturally defined groups, distance teachers and writers should provide a variety of methods, strategies and activities to accommodate a wide range of affective and cognitive needs and preferences.

For all learners, the power of beliefs, whether grounded in cultural background, psychological make-up or personal experience, is such that they can enable or seriously disable language learning. According to a survey done for the European Year of Languages (2001), 22% of the EU population do not learn languages because they believe they are 'not good' at them. Materials writers and teachers face a significant challenge when it comes to addressing such disabling beliefs and encouraging learners to change them through developing the ability to reflect critically. As Benson (2001: 74) points out, 'there is considerable anecdotal evidence in the literature that learners are capable of reflecting on their learning experiences and changing their beliefs or preferences in ways that are beneficial to learning'. The distance language learner who is denied the classroom experience and regular face-to-face contact with other learners has fewer outside factors to influence her or his beliefs and must rely to a greater extent on personal resources. White's study (1999: 449) underlines the adaptive nature of

beliefs among distance language learners through engagement with the materials: '[. . .] learners are influenced in new ways by the solo learning context, to extend and develop their learning skills and knowledge about themselves as learners. Obviously this is one indicator of recognition of metacognitive growth'. Beliefs and expectations can have an effect on motivation, another powerful affective factor.

Motivation

Extensive research carried out over three decades has consistently underlined the importance of motivation as in many instances the best overall predictor of language learning success (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Naiman *et al.*, 1978; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Ushioda, 1996). For distance language learners, motivation has a special and direct role. In many cases it is the determining factor in whether to study or not in the first place, and it remains crucial for enjoyment, goal-setting and retention throughout the course of study. Motivation, at least in the early stages, is largely intrinsic, although extrinsic elements may come into play as aspirations to achieve higher qualifications begin to emerge. Maintaining motivation levels is a particular challenge at a distance. The demands of self-instruction, together with the shift of control from teacher to learner can be overwhelming for many students. Some have difficulty in coping with the amount and range of material that makes up the course, particularly at the start. For others, perceived inadequacy of feedback, frustration at unresolved problems, and lack of opportunities to practise with others and share experiences can have an adverse effect on motivation levels. In many cases, these difficulties diminish or are resolved as students become more skilled in self-management, learn to use their tutor as a key resource, and take the initiative in forming or joining a self-help group.

Dickinson (1995: 168) finds a strong link between motivation and autonomy, in that the two constructs share certain key concepts: 'these are learner independence, learner responsibility and learner choice. Incorporated within these, or entailed by them are other concepts such as decision-making, critical reflection and detachment, all of which are important in cognitive motivation'. He quotes Deci and Ryan (1985: 13) who, in describing self-determination and learner locus of control as key features of intrinsic motivation, are citing the very elements that also characterise autonomy. Ushioda (1996: 2) states unequivocally that 'autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners'. In terms of a causal link, Ellis (1999) warns that 'we do not know whether it is motivation that produces successful learning, or successful learning that enhances motivation'. Gardner and MacIntyre's original socio-education model of second-language acquisition (1993: 2) 'explicitly proposes recip-

rocal causation'. The results of Yang's study (1999) suggest a cyclical rather than a uni-directional relationship between learners' beliefs, motivation and strategy use. Larsen-Freeman (2001: 20) argues that 'it is conceivable that as we search for an advanced conceptualisation of learner factors, we will also find that they are not only mutable, but that they also vary in their influence, depending on the learner's stage of acquisition', and, arguably as important, on the context in which they are learning.

Anxiety, introversion and extraversion

Often implicated in motivation as a negative influence, anxiety is increasingly seen as a powerful factor in language learning. According to Oxford (1999: 59), anxiety 'ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal or formal'. With regard to language learning, Horwitz *et al.* (1986: 128) argue that 'probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does'. Research has focused on a type of anxiety termed language anxiety that is related specifically to language situations (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: 5), and is not connected with general ('trait') anxiety. Its effects are described as pervasive and subtle (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994: 283) and are also associated with 'deficits in listening comprehension, impaired vocabulary learning, reduced word production, low scores on standardised tests, low grades in language courses or a combination of these factors' (Gardner *et al.*, 1997: 345). Anxiety is said to be strongly associated with low self-confidence (Cheng *et al.*, 1999) and with introversion. Introverts tend to have higher anxiety levels than extroverts and take longer to retrieve information. On the more positive side, however, they are more accurate and show greater cognitive control (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999). While extrovert students worry less about accuracy and have a tendency to take risks with their language – both of which are assets when it comes to communicative oral competence – the potential for introverts to become autonomous in their learning through their capacity to self-regulate may be a distinct advantage in distance language learning.

Metacognition, Self-regulation and Autonomy

Self-regulation, self-direction and autonomy are often used synonymously in the literature, and while this does not necessarily lead to confusion, a useful distinction might be to interpret being autonomous as an attribute of the learner, self-direction as a mode of learning and self-regulation (a term borrowed from cognitive psychology) as the practical steps taken by learners to manage their own learning. Learning a second language is generally perceived by learners to be 'different from

learning other subjects, and to involve more time, more practice and different mental processes' (Victori, 1992, cited in Cotterall, 1995: 202). Distance creates a further difficulty. Sussex (1991: 189, cited in White, 1994) maintains that 'languages are more difficult than most subjects to learn in the distance mode because of the complex combination of skills and information required for language mastery'. The knowledge and skills most needed by those learning a language, particularly in the distance context, are those that entail self-awareness and self-management, in other words metacognition. Metacognition is about the management as opposed to the process of learning. Chamot and O'Malley (1994: 372) argue that on the basis of information to date, it 'may be the major factor in determining the effectiveness of individuals' attempts to learn another language'.

Metacognitive knowledge

Flavell (1976: 232) identifies two components of metacognition: (1) metacognitive knowledge, which is 'the knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them'; and (2) metacognitive strategies or skills, which refer to 'the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes', in other words the ability to carry out the planning, monitoring and evaluation that constitute self-regulation. Wenden has written widely on the subject of metacognitive knowledge, which she terms the 'neglected variable' (2001), and its critical role in the self-regulation of learning. She makes an explicit link between metacognitive knowledge, self-regulation and autonomy: 'a recognition of the function of metacognitive knowledge in the self-regulation of learning should contribute to a clearer understanding of learner autonomy [. . .]. The realization of this potential (to develop autonomy) for language learners is in part dependent on their ability to self-regulate or self-direct their learning' (2001: 62). In an earlier work, Wenden (1999: 437) gives two examples of how metacognitive knowledge can influence self-regulation: (1) task analysis in which students call upon their metacognitive knowledge to identify what they need to do and how; and (2) monitoring: 'the regulatory skill that oversees the learning process that follows the initial planning. It is the basis for determining how one is progressing, and it is what constitutes the internal feedback, i.e. the state of awareness which lets the learner know that he/she has encountered a problem'. Little (2001: 35) finds a link between motivation, metacognition and autonomy: '[. . .] the pursuit of autonomy engages the learner's intrinsic motivation and stimulates reflectivity. In other words, the development of learner autonomy brings the motivational and metacognitive dimensions of learning into interaction with each other'. The regulatory

skills that characterise an autonomous approach are widely considered to be dependent on the use of appropriate learning strategies.

Learning strategies

The research into learning strategies, both cognitive and metacognitive, is extensive and varied (Cohen, 1998; Dickinson, 1990; McDonough, 1995, 1999; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991). Cohen (1998: 15) contends that 'learning strategies do not operate by themselves, but rather are directly tied to the learner's underlying learning styles and other personality-related variables (such as anxiety and self-concept) in the learner'. Dickinson (1990: 200) also talks of a likely 'relationship between cognitive style and preferred learning processes and strategies in language learning'. Ellis' case study of two adult German *ab initio* learners (1992: 174–89) suggests that learners do benefit if the instruction suits their learning style but asks: 'Are learning styles fixed or do they change as acquisition proceeds?' A consensus has yet to emerge, though there is some evidence (Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1993; Skehan, 1998) that preferences and styles can change as learners gain proficiency, or in response to pedagogical intervention in the form of strategy training. Little (2002: 2–3) remains sceptical, contending that 'the benefits of teaching learners strategies have still to be demonstrated'. He favours an approach in which learners are encouraged to explore alternatives to find what works for them personally.

Given the particular need for self-management skills in the distance learning environment, it is perhaps unsurprising that studies into the use of strategies in distance language learning have shown distance learners make more use of metacognitive strategies than do classroom learners (White, 1995: 211). Hurd (2000a: 46) also found that women tend to use more metacognitive strategies overall than men. While some learners do succeed in developing many of the features of autonomy through the experience of learning in distance mode, they are unlikely to do so without appropriate support and intervention, and we 'cannot make any assumptions or expectations about learners' willingness or ability to become autonomous learners' (Hurd, 1998b: 222), just because they are adults and have chosen for whatever reason to learn at a distance. For distance learning, any attempts at pedagogic intervention to promote autonomy through the use and transfer of strategies must take place via the materials and tutor feedback on assignments, as attendance at tutorials is optional and cannot therefore be guaranteed. For this reason, all Open University language courses contain sections on learning strategies and study skills, language awareness activities and practical guidance in the development of specific language skills. Students are also encouraged to experiment

with a range of strategies to determine which work best for them (Hurd *et al.*, 2001). This approach ties in well with Sanchez and Gunawardena's view (1998: 61) that in a distance learning environment 'variety itself becomes the solution'. An important strand of the variety necessary to support student diversity is the increasingly significant contribution technology is making to language learning.

The Role of Technology: Promoting Autonomy through Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)

The potential of the Internet to facilitate exchanges among learners in the foreign language is increasingly recognised and exploited in universities in the UK. Sophisticated software and growing expertise in the use of CMC for language learning make it possible today for language learners to communicate not just with one other person asynchronously through e-mail, but with groups of other learners either asynchronously or synchronously, through bulletin boards, text chat, audio-video conferencing or Multi-user Object-oriented domains (MOOs), as part of a virtual community.

E-mail tandem learning

Early attempts to include Internet-based activities in language programmes concentrated largely on tandem exchanges between native speakers of two different languages who were studying each other's mother tongue. One-to-one e-mail tandem learning, set up at Sheffield University UK in the mid-90s, following successful pilots in face-to-face tandem learning, is now an integral part of the modern languages programme. There are today many such schemes worldwide (Kötter, 2002) and the International E-Mail Tandem Network is now well established. The potential advantages lie in 'its combination of immediacy with asynchronicity [. . .] it can be used at any time of day or night; no external constraint governs the frequency of an exchange of messages, or their content (Lewis *et al.*, 1996: 113). It 'can offer genuine interpersonal and intercultural communication' and is 'an ideal tool for the autonomous learner' (1996: 117) in that the medium encourages learners to take control over their own learning.

Advantages of online communication: Text-based and voice-based

Most practice and research is in text-based CMC, as an extension of rather than a substitute for classroom-based learning. The advantages are in both the cognitive and affective domain. Students working asynchronously have time to attend to grammar and develop their linguistic

accuracy. The text-based mode allows them to pause and reflect while interacting, thus creating a 'special relationship between interaction and reflection' (Warschauer, 1997: 5). In an online environment, learners feel less inhibited as they are out of the spotlight, and peer support can have a positive impact on attitudes towards learning. Levels of participation are also found to be much greater and more equal in online as opposed to face-to-face discussion (Hudson & Bruckman, 2002; Warschauer, 1997). For distance learners, online communication 'can provide a sense of "presence"'. CMC in general offers the opportunity to communicate and socialize with other learners' (Shield, 2002). At the OU, an increasing number of language courses offer online tuition through Lyceum, an audio-graphic Internet-based conferencing system. Early findings from research studies (Hampel, 2003; Shield *et al.*, 2000) confirm that a voice-based as opposed to a text-based CMC is just as successful in supporting and engaging learners, reducing social isolation and anxiety and enhancing motivation. The combination of different modes that Lyceum offers – visual (through graphics), verbal (through writing and text chat) and acoustic – allows 'a choice between modes to suit the task in hand, as well as catering for different learning styles' (Hampel, 2003: 25). It also helps to address the well-known drawback of learning a language at distance – the development and practice of oral skills. In addition, it has the potential to promote autonomy through empowering learners to manage their own interactions, choosing and negotiating between options and gradually increasing their ability to take responsibility for their own learning, not only during online tutorials but at any time with other learners.

Critical reflection on both language (cognitive, form-focused) and learning (metacognitive), is also strongly encouraged as an integral part of successful online activity. For distance language learners, however, this is by no means automatic. Lamy and Hassan (2003: 54) in their study of what influences reflective interaction in distance peer learning, warn that 'distance learners cannot easily be persuaded to undertake either solo or interactive reflective work if task presentation is not completely explicit in its expectation that they do so' and suggest that task writers 'might encourage reflection by building in psychological and conversational "space" in which learners can be responsible for 'task-management as "themselves".'

Challenges

It would be naive to suggest that technology mediated learning is problem-free. While a major advantage is seen to be the reduction in social isolation for geographically dispersed and / or shy learners, others dislike

what they see as a lack of a human dimension. Moreover, while a CMC environment can be motivating and confidence boosting, without proper guidance the reverse can occur and, far from reflecting empowerment and expertise in self-direction, 'student work may become unfocused, unbalanced and trivial' (Schwienhorst, 1998: 119). Other difficulties are the level of technical expertise needed, the danger of information overload and the absence of paralinguistic elements such as body language. Some students and teachers simply find the medium depersonalising, fragmentary and lacking the humanity and intimacy that the face-to-face environment affords. There is still a major job to be done in convincing many actual and potential users of its benefits.

Conclusion

According to a recent working definition from Little (2002: 1), 'the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others'. For distance language learners, this is just the starting point. 'Capacity' and 'readiness' need to become actualised rapidly as abilities and skills. Distance learning students are no more homogeneous than classroom learners, but they are by definition less accessible. This presents a real challenge to all course designers, task writers and tutors to devise ways of supporting their learners at a distance in developing the skills of self-management and self-regulation that are central to autonomy. Strategy development embedded in the OU course materials offers more than just the basic tools, and is constantly being improved and extended. The use of CMC programmes can enhance the potential for autonomy by giving greater freedom of control, a choice of mode, tasks and activities that promote reflection and intercultural awareness, and a communicative environment which is non-threatening and supportive. What is important is that, in the effort to address the specific challenges of the distance language learning context, and the exciting potential of new technologies, we do not lose sight of the human dimension of language learning. Future research also needs to address the issue of transfer of language skills developed online, and to what extent the development of autonomy, equal participation and increased levels of self-confidence can translate to the real world in which language interactions are spontaneous, unpredictable, and conducted face-to-face.

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PUBLICATION SIX

Hurd, S. (2000a) Distance language learners and learner support: beliefs, difficulties and use of strategies. *Links and Letters 7: Autonomy in language learning*, 61-80.

ISSN 1133-7397.

Distance language learners and learner support: beliefs, difficulties and use of strategies

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September 1999

Abstract

Evidence is mounting from a number of studies undertaken with groups of learners of all ages and all abilities that there is a particular factor common to successful language learners: strategic competence involving the use of appropriate learning strategies. The growing body of research into this area has not, however, had much to say so far about the special situation of those learning a language at a distance. Based on the findings of surveys and discussions carried out with students enrolled in the final year of the Diploma in French at the Open University, this paper investigates learner beliefs about learning a language at a distance, difficulties encountered, attitudes to learner support and the use of strategies. It concludes that metacognitive strategies may have an enhanced role for the learner of a language at a distance, but that further research is needed to determine more clearly the nature of this role, how metacognitive strategies relate to learner variables and the specific implications for learner autonomy, tutor support and course design.

Key words: Autonomy, Distance Learning, Language Learning Strategies, Metacognition.

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1. Introduction: distance language learning and its associated problems

The last decade has seen a rapid growth in the provision of distance learning courses covering a wide range of subjects and settings. There are now, for example, over 6,000 learners studying languages with the Open University UK (OU). To date, not much research has been undertaken which examines the nature of those courses or the difficulties experienced by distance language learners. Yet those of us who work with them are becoming increasingly aware of the particular strain that isolation, time pressures and conflicting priorities can cause. Moreover, those learning at a distance do not have the standard university infrastructure to call upon when in difficulty: teachers or language advisers on site, classes to go to, ready access to other students to compare notes or to ask for advice. To support them in their studies, each OU language student is assigned a tutor, and 2-3 hour group tutorials are scheduled roughly once a month. Students may choose to attend tutorials or the occasional dayschool set up in most regions for more intensive practice of the language, but are under no obligation to do so, and, if they live in remote areas, they may not even have the choice. They can always contact their tutor by phone, but there have to be limits placed on this kind of contact, and, moreover it does not suit everyone, particularly those who feel they need a face to talk to.

Distance language learners therefore need to be fairly autonomous at least in their attitude to learning already or, if not, be receptive to what it entails and be prepared to work hard at it early on, in the absence of face-to-face regular contact with a teacher. Those who are used to total dependence on a teacher will find learning by this mode extremely difficult and are likely to drop out if the road to autonomy is too painful. Ultimately, it is up to the learner in the first instance to be open to advice and willing to work with the support available.

Using the findings of two surveys and a focus group discussion carried out in 1998 with students following the Open University's third-stage French course L210: *Mises au point* (loosely translated as *fine-tuning*), this paper investigates learners' perceptions of distance language learning, specific difficulties encountered in learning at a distance and appropriate learning strategies to address them. It goes on to explore the extent of learners' readiness to develop strategic competence and what the implications might be for the teaching and learning process and for course design.

2. Learning strategies and the distance language learner

While there is now a significant body of research into learning strategies and the language learning process in standard learning contexts, there is little to be found which relates specifically to the experience of distance language learners. A previous survey, carried out by Schrafnagl and Fage in 1996 into the background, learning experience and strategies of first-stage Open Uni-

versity language students in the London Region noted this scarcity and concluded that "overall, in the field of open and distance language learning, a great deal of research remains to be done in order to identify what learning strategies are successful and for what kind of learner" (1998: 68).

A review of the literature on learning strategies gives an insight into the complexity of this area of research. Wenden (1991: 18) contends that "researchers in second language acquisition have not been able to come to a consensus regarding what a strategy is". While accepting that this is a controversial issue, Cohen maintains that "the element of consciousness is what distinguishes *strategies* from those processes that are not strategic" (1998: 4) and goes on to describe language learner strategies as constituting "the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both" (p. 5). Oxford (1990: 1) supports the involvement of 'self' in defining strategies, considering them as "especially important for language learning, because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement", and adds that if used appropriately, they "result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence". Conscious selection and self-directed involvement, both features of strategies as described above, are also characteristics of an autonomous approach, and of general relevance, therefore, to the needs of distance language learners.

Learning strategies vary widely, however, and do not automatically divide up into distinct categories; hence the efforts by many researchers (Naiman et al., 1978; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991) to differentiate them in order to understand better their role in language learning and how they can best be taught and transferred. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classify strategies under three main headings: cognitive (applying a specific technique to a particular task, for example repeating, reasoning and analyzing), metacognitive (related to the learning process, for example organizing, planning and monitoring) and socio-affective (involving oneself and others, for example co-operating with peers, seeking clarification). They give a special emphasis to those classed as metacognitive, maintaining that "students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions" (1990: 8).

The identification and classification of such approaches as metacognitive draws on Flavell (1976) who defines metacognition in terms of both skills and knowledge. Metacognitive *knowledge* is, in his view, "the knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them" (p. 232) and metacognitive *skills* "the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes" (p. 232). In relation to language learning, Victori and Lockhart (1995: 224) define metacognitive knowledge as "the general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching". Dickinson (1992),

highlights the skills aspect, and talks in terms of 'the executive', because the strategies involved in the application of metacognition are used "to manage or control the learning process" (p. 19). Both aspects would seem to be of particular relevance to distance language learners: (1) metacognitive knowledge because of the power of such knowledge to affect the learning process, a major consideration for those learning on their own; and (2) metacognitive skills because of their emphasis on planning, monitoring and control of learning. For distance learners, left to a large extent to their own devices, it could be that metacognitive knowledge and the development of metacognitive skills are not only an essential part of effective learning but also a pre-requisite to it.

3. The study

3.1. *The Open University context*

The Centre for Modern Languages at the Open University was set up in 1991 to respond to an overwhelming demand for distance language courses. The first course L120 *Ouverture* for those at a lower intermediate level was presented in 1995. There are now three staged distance learning courses comprising a fully integrated mixed media package in both French and German, which lead to a Diploma. Work is in progress for a Spanish Diploma, which will be completed in 2001. The Diploma takes students to a level commensurate with the end of the second year of undergraduate study, and can be counted towards an OU BA or BSc degree. The academic year runs from February to October during which time students must submit compulsory assignments (TMAs), both written and oral on a regular basis, to be marked by their designated tutor. There is also a compulsory week-long Summer School which takes place at a French University in August. The result of the continuous assessment component plus an end-of-year examination held in October, together determine the final grade.

3.2. *The subjects*

A random selection of 204 students from all parts of the UK following the French course L210: *Mises au point*, was made by the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology in February 1998, at the start of the academic year. The students taking part in the study were at the third and final stage of the French Diploma and could therefore be assumed to have already reached an advanced level of language proficiency. They would have acquired their language competence through study at school or in further or adult education, through following the previous two Open University French courses or through spells of living or working abroad.

We might reasonably assume that such learners would have developed

confidence in their ability to make progress, and would, moreover, have at their disposal a range of tried and tested strategies for effective language learning. Such assumptions in relation to distance language learners would be risky, however, for two possible reasons: (1) good levels of language proficiency do not necessarily go hand in hand with superior language learning skills: "it is perfectly possible for a learner to be advanced in the first sense, yet a beginner in the second, and vice-versa" (Riley, 1987: 75), and (2) the lack of pre-requisites to Open University language courses increases the likelihood of a very diverse set of learner styles and varying degrees of competence in learning. Moreover, the relationship between language competence and learning competence is complex, and must take account of individual variables, such as gender, age, previous learning experiences, motivation, attitude and personal beliefs about self-efficacy, all of which are significant factors in the language learning process.

3.3. Research questions and methods

The present study was set up to investigate the following questions: (1) what use do students make of learner support as provided by the course materials and tutorials?; (2) what are their perceptions of the successful distance language learner and of themselves as language learners?; (3) what specific difficulties do they identify with regard to distance language learning?; 4) which strategies do they use to improve their own learning and to what extent are these gender-related?

The main research tools used to gather information for the study were two structured questionnaires and a focus group discussion. Two small pilot surveys conducted in 1997 helped to fine-tune and test the research methods. In conjunction with experts in questionnaire design from the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology (IET), the author revised and extended the questionnaires in order to improve clarity and to correspond more closely with the research questions.

The initial questionnaire¹ dispatched in February 1998 and which included multiple-choice and Lickert-scale type of questions, had the following aims:

- 1) obtain background information of the sample in terms of age, gender and previous study of French;
- 2) elicit preliminary impressions of the course and the usefulness of the various course components, including video documentary, audio resource material, audio activities and print material;
- 3) make a preliminary assessment of the degree of student readiness for autonomy by analyzing: (i) their attitude towards the learner support

1. Due to space limitations, the questionnaires are not included.

systems available: the Course Guide², the *dossier*³ and the tutorials; and (ii) their perceptions of the 'good distance language learner' and of themselves as language learners.

The second questionnaire was sent out in June 1998, four months into the course. Its major aims were to:

- 1) make a fuller investigation of the use made by students of the learner support provided by the course. In addition to the Course Guide and the *dossier*, other forms of support including the Language Learner's Good Study Guide, the Notes on Language and Style⁴ and the booklets containing transcripts of all audio-visual material were analyzed;
- 2) investigate in more depth perceptions of the factors necessary for successful distance language learning;
- 3) elicit the difficulties experienced by learners with distance learning;
- 4) analyze the actual strategies used by students to address those difficulties and improve their learning. In the design of this study no differentiation was made between types of strategies, but these mostly included those classed as metacognitive, and to a lesser extent, cognitive.

The early questions relating to the course overall and to the course components in both surveys were included for course evaluation purposes only. The analysis of responses to these questions was not therefore included in this study.

The final stage involved a small focus group of eight volunteers who had taken part in both surveys, led by the author. The group met once for discussion in December after the end of the course, but before end-of-course results had been released. Students were sent a set of questions in advance, designed to stand as a basis for a more detailed face-to-face discussion on some of the points raised in the surveys.

3.4. Data analysis

Data from both surveys were analyzed by the author, in terms of frequency and percentage response, and in the case of the second questionnaire, with the help of a computerized statistical analysis program. The response rate was

2. A 24-page supplement which explains the content of the course, the assessment process and how to get the most from your studies.
3. To help in the development of strategy use, students are encouraged to develop a *dossier* which might take the form of an exercise book or loose-leaf folder, a card index or a file on computer, and in which students note down whatever they feel might be helpful to them in their learning. Students are given general advice on how to do this, initially in the Course Guide and then in sections entitled *dossier* throughout the course books, which gradually build up suggestions for developing a wide range of strategies.
4. Seven supplements, one to accompany each course book.

67.8% for the first questionnaire and 65.2% for the second. The open-ended sections in both questionnaires provided useful qualitative feedback which helped raise awareness of key issues, and provided concrete information on which to base further study. The focus group discussion allowed a different method of data collection and helped to clarify and extend information arising from the two surveys. It also acted as a forum for exchange of ideas, and enabled a clearer picture to emerge of the views, beliefs and needs of a group of language learners within a distance learning set-up.

In the following section, results from both surveys and the focus group discussion are presented together. For some variables a comparison of the data obtained from the two surveys is made with regard to those questions relating to the use of support materials, and to the "good distance language learner". A breakdown of percentages in terms of gender is also presented in relation to the questions in the second survey on the use of language learning strategies and learning through assessment.

4. Major findings

Learner variables, reasons for present study, preliminary impressions

The sample of returned questionnaires contained 87 women and 51 men. Students were spread across all age ranges from 20-70+, with 28.9% in the 50-69 age range. 24.1% of women and 15.7% of men were in the 20-39 range. The first questionnaire revealed that 94.2% of the sample had studied French at school, of whom 39.1% had gained an advanced qualification (e.g., 'A' level or Scottish Highers, the level required for entry to most undergraduate programmes). 68.1% had studied French post-school in further, adult or higher education and 71.7% had studied both the first and second stage French courses. A few claimed to have gained proficiency solely through reading French books and magazines and listening to French radio. Some were clearly at the entry level expected. Others may also have reached a good standard through other means. It was interesting to note that 44.2% had already studied French in an independent context, for example using Linguaphone, Berlitz or BBC courses, although it can only suggest rather than prove that these students would have already developed some of the skills and strategies needed for learning a language at a distance. Nearly half the sample gave 'for pleasure' as the most important reason for studying the course, followed by 'to gain the Diploma' (26.8%). Only 4.3% gave 'work' as the most important reason. Further comments from students indicated strong francophile tendencies, for example wanting to live and/or work in France or to read in French about French life and culture. Keeping the mind active and gaining communication skills were other general reasons.

Although initial impressions of the course were extremely positive, open-ended comments revealed some anxiety over the amount of work to be covered in eight months and the need for strategies to cope with the pace in par-

ticular, but also with the absence of the classroom for regular oral interaction in the foreign language.

Attitudes to learner support

Attitudes to support materials were investigated in both surveys, the first concentrating on the Course Guide and *dossier*, while the second covered all support materials. Figures were low for the Course Guide, with less than half (46.3%) of the participants in the first survey finding it extremely or very helpful. Some explained that in order to cope with an 'overwhelming' amount of material arriving all at the same time, they had to prioritize, and this meant, in many cases, choosing course books and audio-visual materials over supplements. The numbers responding positively were even lower for the Course Guide in the second survey (35.8%). While some considered it "necessary for distance learning", others clearly felt guides were superfluous: "By the third year students should know what to do"; "as I have always studied either at work or home, I am in the habit of studying and have evolved my own system". The transcripts of all the audio-visual material, on the other hand, were found by 87.6% of students to be indispensable or very valuable and 77.5% gave these same ratings for the Notes on Language and Style.

Learner support in terms of tutorials revealed quite diverse attitudes. Attendance was considered extremely important by 34.8% and very important by 26.8%. Only 1.1% thought that it was not important. Some students were very positive: "I think attendance should be compulsory in language courses. If a group has a very consistent attendance rate, the group 'gels' and is supportive of one another". Others found tutorials more useful for learning how to approach assessed tasks than for anything else: "Their main importance for me is the tips about how to tackle the assignments and the exam". Tutorials were clearly seen by many as a context for the development of socio-affective strategies to combat isolation and to practise oral skills, perceived as a major problem for distance language learners.

The 'good distance language learner': factors in successful distance language learning

Perceptions of the characteristics of the 'good distance language learner' (see figure 1) in the first survey centred on being well-organized and having the ability to prioritize, which were identified by 90.6% of the whole sample, though only 44.2% and 48.6% respectively indicated that they could personally demonstrate these abilities. High motivation was also high up on the list of 'good distance language learner' characteristics (89.1%) followed by persistence (76.1%) and the ability to assess one's own language strengths and weaknesses (76.1%). 71% ticked 'ability to seek help' though only 42% felt they could actually do this. 65.2% considered it important to be willing to accept constructive criticism, with slightly more indicating that this also

Factors influencing learning	Survey 1		Survey 2
	You as a distance language learner	The good distance language learner	The good distance language learner
Being well-organised	90.6%	44.2%	84.4%
Self-confidence	44.2%	28.3%	96.7%
Enthusiasm/motivation	89.1%	65.2%	98.9%
Being self-aware and reflective	37%	31.2%	64.4%
Persistence	76.1%	60.1%	98.9%
Ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses	76.1%	53.6%	82.3%
Ability to seek help	71%	42%	82.2%
Willingness to accept constructive criticism	65.2%	65.9%	85.6%
Being good at taking the initiative	46.4%	24.6%	61.1%
Ability to prioritise	90.6%	48.6%	78.9%
Age*	—	—	43.3%
Gender*	—	—	11.1%
Intelligence*	—	—	82.2%
Knowledge of grammar in your own language*	—	—	88.9%
Ability to analyse*	—	—	72.2%
Ability to get on with others*	—	—	50%
Willingness to take risks*	—	—	86.7%
Other*	—	—	15.6%

* These categories were added and surveyed in the second questionnaire only.

Figure 1. The good distance language learner (first and second survey results).

applied to them personally (65.9%). Being good at taking the initiative (46.4%), self-confidence (44.2%) and being self-aware and reflective (37%) were considered less important.

A comparison of the two columns in figure 1 gave a useful insight into learners' beliefs and perceptions about the characteristics of the "good distance language learner" and about their own self-efficacy as distance language learners. The gap between the 'good' distance language learner" (column 2) and the 'actual' distance language learner (column 1) is significant, particularly in relation to metacognitive skills. Organization and time-management, including prioritizing, represented a gap of over 40%; the ability to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses was slightly less at 22.5%. Being reflective, a key metacognitive process, was considered an important char-

acteristic by only just over a third of participants (37%) and even fewer reckoned that it described their own learning (31.2%). This was not as low, however, as the figure for taking the initiative (24.6%). Planning, organizing, self-monitoring, reflecting, all major metacognitive skills or processes were clearly not much in evidence at the start of the course for the sample overall. Students considered themselves to be highly motivated and persistent, yet their levels of confidence were low, and less than half (42%) felt able to ask for help.

In the second survey a question on factors relevant to successful distance language learning largely mirrored the 'good distance language learner' characteristics from the first survey, though there were some important additions, including age, gender, intelligence, analytical skills, knowledge of grammar in your own language, ability to get on with others and willingness to take risks. For all coincident factors, bar two —being well organized and the ability to prioritize— the figures from the second survey were considerably higher than those from the first, ranging from a 52.5% differential (self-confidence) to 6.2% (ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses). It is reasonable to conclude that students overall were beginning to develop a greater awareness of what was needed for effective language learning in terms of overall skills and attributes as they progressed through the course.

Motivation, persistence, self-confidence, knowledge of grammar in your own language and willingness to take risks attracted the highest percentage of responses for factors important to successful distance language learning. In terms of related strategies, the finding on motivation is reflected in a study of 1,200 American university students in which a self-report survey, SILL, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford 1990), was used as the primary instrument, accompanied by a background questionnaire. This study concluded that "motivation was the single most important influence on learning strategy use" (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989i: 2). Gender was rated lowest at 11.1%, an interesting response given the findings from some studies (Carroll, 1985; Oxford, 1989) indicating that females make better language learners. Age, although rated second to last, nevertheless, attracted a significant 43.3% of the sample. In terms of metacognitive factors overall, being well-organized and being able to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses were rated high enough to be in the first half of the list (84.4%; 82.3%). Analytical and planning skills, reflectiveness and initiative were rated lower, although students were certainly more aware of their value midway through the course than they had been at the start.

Given that fewer and fewer British students are taught English grammar at school, the percentage for knowledge of grammar in their own language (88.9%) was high and confirms a view found among many language learners of all ages that grammar is the key to unlocking the mysteries of language learning. This sample was also not unusual in demonstrating another com-

monly held belief that ageing has a negative effect on learning (43.3%). Correcting inaccurate beliefs can be deemed a necessary pre-requisite to the teaching of good learning strategies. This involves "considering this knowledge which students themselves bring to the task of language learning and help(ing) learners modify it if it (their metacognitive knowledge) is potentially impeding their learning and their potential for autonomy" (Victori and Lockhart 1995: 225). It is a task which presents particular difficulties for all those involved in a distance learning set-up.

In the second survey 15.6% of students also contributed ideas of their own concerning factors influencing successful learning, which covered a wide range: good family support, opportunities for natural exposure to the language, having a goal in mind, opportunities to practise speaking and listening, having a structure and regulated study. Furthermore, when the focus group discussed whether specific skills, qualities or characteristics were needed by the successful distance language learner, students were unanimous on the following: "determination, high self-esteem, will-power, guts [...]". There was no room for 'weaklings', as they put it.

Difficulties for distance language learners

On the process of distance language learning in the second survey, students were asked simply to tick 'yes' or 'no' as to whether they were experiencing any particular difficulties. Of the 90% who answered the question, 70% reported in the affirmative and 20% in the negative. Unsurprisingly, the main barriers were: 1) lack of time (46.7%), e.g., "difficult to pace work as well as fulfil family responsibilities", and 2) few opportunities for practice with others (46.7%), e.g., 'lack of spoken interaction is a problem'. Over a third of students found it hard to assess their own progress; a further 10% had difficulty asking for help, e.g. "I feel overwhelmed by all the material - it can be isolating".

The use of strategies

In terms of strategy use overall in the second survey (see figure 2), the strategy cited most frequently, a cognitive one, was repeating words and phrases out loud (73.3%). This ties in with a study carried out by O'Malley and Chamot (1993) among beginner and intermediate students where 'both groups' were found to favour "repetition as the most frequently used strategy" (p. 80). Another frequently cited cognitive strategy was regular testing of vocabulary (60%). McDonough (1999) also highlights the importance of vocabulary strategies, which he reports as "central to all other language use situations" (p. 9). Other cognitive strategies used by students involved recording themselves speaking (35.6%), making notes as they watched or listened to recordings (28.9%) and keeping a log of all course-based activities that had been completed (17.8%).

Strategy	All students	Female students	Male students
Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself	60%	58.9%	64.7%
Play word games/use mnemonics/make mind maps	10%	8.9%	11.8%
Note down vocabulary from French radio/TV/films	31.1%	28.6%	35.3%
Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration	28.9%	30.4%	23.5%
Repeat words and phrases out loud	73.3%	71.4%	70.6%
Record yourself speaking	35.6%	35.7%	35.3%
Use ideas from the <i>dossier</i> sections	40%	44.6%	35.3%
Create your own language exercises/activities	4.4%	5.4%	0%
Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them	33.3%	32.1%	35.3%
Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve	50%	57.1%	44.1%
Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help	33.3%	33.9%	29.4%
Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way	65.6%	46.4%	64.7%
Allow time for checking and double checking your TMAs before sending them off	61.1%	66.1%	55.9%
Keep a log of all course-based activities that have been completed	17.8%	23.2%	8.8%
Keep a separate diary of your progress	0%	0%	0%
Other (<i>please specify</i>)	12.2%	10.7%	11.8%

Figure 2. Use of strategies.

In terms of metacognitive strategies, "allowing time for checking and double checking TMAs" was the strategy most frequently cited (60%). Half the sample set their priorities for study in advance and 40% used ideas from the *dossier* sections. A third ringed "noting down language points causing difficulty as you go along" and "reflecting on techniques which worked best for you", a surprisingly low figure, but nonetheless one that ties in with results from the first survey which revealed that over a third of students (37%) perceived being self-aware and reflective as less important characteristics of the 'good distance language learner'. A 0% return for keeping a progress diary was disappointing, if not unexpected, given that (1) students had not been specifically asked to do this, (2) 40% were already using ideas from the *dossier*, over 17% were keeping a log of all course-based activities that had been completed, and a third were regularly noting down as they went along the language points causing difficulty, and (3) students have severe constraints on their time and tend to favour familiar, well-tried

approaches. Nevertheless, given the research indicating how useful out of all 'log-type' documents a learner diary can be for fostering self-awareness and helping in the development of metacognitive behaviours, it might be prudent for course writers to reconsider how best to advise students on this particular strategy.

The 12.2% who cited 'other' strategies read French books, newspapers and magazines for extra practice. Some watched French films or listened to French radio. Others attended Adult Education classes. These could generally be classified under "try to make use of any language opportunities that come your way". Additional strategies included collecting cuttings from the French press, photocopying each book's grammar points to use when revising, and highlighting relevant vocabulary and language structures.

A breakdown of the percentage results by gender showed some similarity between each gender and the overall sample, but there were some notable differences between the genders (see figure 2). Men featured in greater numbers than women in six of the fifteen cognitive strategies by a percentage ranging from 18.3% (making use of language practice opportunities) to 2.9% (playing word games). Women outnumbered men for seven of the strategies by a percentage ranging from 14.4% (keeping a log of all completed course-based activities) to 4.5% (noting down the language points causing difficulty and asking for help). Figures were roughly the same for repeating words and phrases out loud and recording yourself speaking, the former placed top by both men and women and the latter around the middle by both sexes. Although there are similarities, the results of this study do not entirely reflect the findings from the previously mentioned survey carried out among 1,200 American university language students (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989 iii), which suggested that gender "had a profound effect on strategy choice" (p. 294) and found that in three out of five categories of strategy "females reported more frequent strategy use than males, while males reported no more frequent strategy use than females in *any* factor" (p. 295). While women in the OU survey did indeed report more frequent strategy use overall than men, this was not the case for each type of strategy. The one known factor which distinguishes the two studies is distance. This could suggest that distance learners use strategies in a different way.

An analysis by gender of the metacognitive strategies—setting priorities, managing time, reflecting—revealed that women outnumbered men in their use, except for reflecting, where the percentage difference was 3.2%. This ties in to a certain extent with another study investigating the language learning strategies of 79 adults (Oxford, Nyikos and Ehrman, 1988) which found that "women in the study exhibited greater use of self-management strategies, which involve taking charge of one's own learning through self-monitoring, self-evaluation, identifying goals, planning language tasks, and so on" (p. 325). In our study, women also showed a greater willingness to take it upon themselves to reach out to other students when it came to assessment problems. In answer to a question on what steps respondents took when a marked

TMA was returned, although figures were very low overall, men were more likely to contact their tutor for advice (8.8% of men; 3.6% of women), while women preferred to contact a fellow student for comparison and support (25% of women; 11.8% of men). An overwhelming majority of the whole sample (96.7%) checked their tutors' comments and followed the advice given. 14.7% of men and 8.9% of women, however, assumed that any language problems would sort themselves out in time.

The focus group who met at the end of the course and were asked to comment specifically on strategies to help them cope with the pace of the course and the development of speaking skills had some interesting ideas for prioritizing, including 'being selective' about the course book activities, i.e., not trying to do everything, and "using the unit objectives to focus efforts" (these appear at the start of each course book section under "key learning points"). They also advocated having a 'routine' in order to help with the pace of the course and "keeping going at all costs", even if this meant leaving things out, as opposed to systematically undertaking all suggested tasks and risking getting behind. There was general agreement too, that completing the monthly TMAs was essential to the learning process, and the group seemed to be suggesting assessment as a personal structuring device in learning. With regard to strategies for developing speaking skills, they considered that it was very much up to the learner to take the initiative, through becoming involved in self-help groups, attending conversation classes, going to French films or recording them off-air, having the car radio permanently tuned to French stations and reading French novels, magazines and newspapers. The week-long compulsory Summer School was seen as invaluable for improving speaking skills, given that it takes place at a French University and the only language of communication for a whole week is French.

Creating and using a *dossier* can reflect more than any other component of the course the degree to which learners are autonomous. The responses obtained in the second survey about its usefulness (see figure 3) showed that the highest readings were for reinforcement of what had been learned (68.9%), followed by as an aid to revision (67.8%). Some reported on more cognitive uses: developing vocabulary (66.7%) and style (41.1%), focusing on particular language structures (52.2%), improving accuracy (40%). Fewer students used it to develop metacognitive strategies: assessing language strengths and weaknesses (24.2%), improving study skills (21.1%), and gaining more control over learning (18.9%). The fact that lower numbers chose to use it for metacognitive purposes suggests that levels of autonomy are not as high as one might expect among distance learners, or conversely, it might suggest the opposite, that students are already autonomous in their approach to language learning and therefore have no need of additional support mechanisms.

The ratings for the *dossier* overall indicate, however, that for at least three-quarters of the sample it is of some benefit. However, when answering the

Use	Reasons	Most important reason
to reinforce what I have learned	68.9%	27.8%
to help me develop my vocabulary	66.7%	13.3%
to remind me of what I need to practise	58.9%	7.8%
to help me focus on particular language structures	52.2%	3.3%
to help me improve my style	41.1%	1.1%
to help me assess my language strengths and weaknesses	24.2%	4.4%
to help me improve my accuracy	40%	4.4%
to give me more control over my learning	18.9%	2.2%
to help me improve my study skills	21.1%	0%
to give me new ideas for solving specific language problems	28.9%	2.2%
to help me improve my pronunciation	10%	1.1%
as an aid to revision	67.8%	21.2%
other (please specify)	6.7%	3.3%

Figure 3. Use of the dossier.

question on strategies, only 40% of the sample claimed to actually use ideas from the *dossier* sections in the course books. Comments focused very heavily on the time factor: "Basically the ideas are excellent but I just don't have time". Those who were good at prioritizing reported with confidence: "Probably because I am an advanced language learner I know what I want to achieve". Negative reports indicated some frustration and feelings of inadequacy: "[...] too focused on an ideal learning situation, which seldom exists!"; "Lack of time to follow up suggestions —so they make me feel inadequate". This supports a general view that "time pressures work against those experimenting with their learning strategies" (Murphy, 1998). The student who suggested that "the *dossier* needed to be organized before the start of the course (because) there is insufficient time during the course", possibly summed up the situation for everyone.

Students tended to perceive the *dossier* as an optional extra, rather than as a key element in the development of effective learning strategies. This was confirmed in discussion with the focus group who found that it caused "additional stress". This group also made a useful suggestion: that there should be a 'sample *dossier*' included in the course materials, which they could use as a model for their own if they so wished.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study are significant in terms of widening our knowledge base with regard to specific variables among distance language

learners, and identifying areas for further investigation. With regard to learner support, it was perhaps surprising to note the lack of reliance on guides, given the importance the course writers attach to these to inform and support students at a very early stage in their preparation for the course. Attitudes to the *dossier* were also disappointing, though the findings were not entirely unexpected, given the amount of course material to be covered in a relatively short space of time. Less surprising, given the particular situation of the distance language learner was the fact that 61.6% felt that tutorials were extremely or very important, and only 1.1% considered them unimportant.

Students taking part in the first survey had their own perceptions of the characteristics that might constitute the 'good distance language learner', particularly in terms of planning and prioritizing, though over half considered that they personally fell short of these skills. Being self-confident was not considered an important characteristic and certainly lack of confidence was very evident among students in the first survey. Findings from the second survey on perceptions of factors relevant to successful distant language learning indicate that the pattern had changed. Self-confidence was considered almost as important as motivation and persistence. Students were also more aware of metacognitive skills as important to learning at a distance and how these might help them to cope with the special difficulties of learning at a distance. It is useful to note that 54 of the 138 students who completed the open-ended sections in the second survey chose to comment on the improvements they felt they had made as language learners, many of which indicated increased metacognitive awareness and the use of metacognitive strategies. This ties in with Garner's contention that "to make an individual metacognitively aware is to ensure that the individual has learned how to learn" (1988). Comments indicated ways in which they felt they had improved: "more willing to take risks and make mistakes"; "better at prioritizing"; "much more aware of my grammatical faults"; "better organized"; "improved in ability to assess my own strengths and weaknesses and seek help"; "have increased self-confidence"; "have a better understanding of the need for commitment and persistence"; "better at time-management"; "more assertive in conversation" and, most impressive of all, "I now understand how to learn a language". Responses from the focus group confirmed that it was the responsibility of learners to organize ways of working and manage their own time. The tutor can "help but can't do it for you".

While there was some evidence to support other studies on gender-related use of strategies (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Bacon & Finneman, 1992), the findings did not indicate that women use all types of strategy more frequently than men. It is suggested that the element of distance might have some bearing on this and more detailed follow-up studies are needed to evaluate this hypothesis.

6. Implications for course writers and tutors

The majority of students who responded to the second survey (60%) firmly believed that they had become more effective learners during the course of their eight months of study. We were clearly doing something right, but which elements of the course helped to bring about these perceived improvements, particularly with regard to metacognitive skills, would need further investigation. The findings also suggest that we need to target our efforts more specifically towards the 40% who did not provide feedback through the open-ended sections. While there are numerous reasons why they might have remained silent, including probably lack of time, it is also highly probable that a number of them had not perceived any improvements and were among those who had not developed competence in the use of appropriate strategies.

The lesson to be learned for course writers and tutors is that language learners at a distance need to be shown more clearly and with more concrete examples why and how developing strategies, in particular metacognitive ones, can help promote more effective learning and by doing so, be time-saving rather than time-consuming in the long run. If this can be explicitly linked to language gains, in particular, improved oral skills which students find the most difficult to develop at a distance, reaction is likely to be more positive.

This is no easy task. Developing autonomy happens over time and "metacognitive skills cannot be simply taught, blanket-fashion" (Ridley, 1997: 66). Distance learners repeatedly tell us that their time is strictly limited. It is therefore understandable that they tend to prefer to use simple surface strategies that are aimed at reproduction of learning matter, and have quick, measurable results. We need to remind ourselves that the process is ongoing and that "we cannot make any assumptions or expectations about learners' willingness or ability to become autonomous learners" (Hurd, 1998: 222). We also need to be aware that metacognitive monitoring processes in particular can lead to an "overburdening of the cognitive apparatus and may therefore disturb the processing of information" (Scheumer, 1993: 8).

7. Conclusion

In classroom-based learning, much of the planning and prioritizing is carried out, at least initially, by the teacher on a regular basis. For the learners there is a structure, a support system and constant checks on learning that make it easier for them to cope. While there is a general consensus among leading researchers in the field (Brown and Palincsar, 1982; Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990; Ridley, 1997) to support the claim by O'Malley and Chamot (1993: 105) that "individuals who take a more strategic approach learn more rapidly and effectively than individuals who do not",

it is the distance learners who are especially at risk if they fail to develop strategies that will help them to plan and monitor their work in the absence of regular classroom contact. A great deal of research needs to be undertaken to determine how to promote strategy development and strategy use among distance learners. The question of the degree of autonomy appropriate to individual distance learners also needs to be addressed. Total autonomy may well be counter-productive for those who may be "unused or unwilling to self-direct in other areas of their lives and who find it stressful, if not impossible, to relinquish the role of passive recipient in the teaching and learning process" (Hurd, 1998: 72). It is quite likely that some students do not want to develop skills that empower them to monitor, regulate and orchestrate their learning and prefer others to do that for them. If people choose to be dependent rather than autonomous in the ways they go about their daily life, why should they want to do the reverse when it comes to learning? Learners' beliefs and attitudes are highly relevant and cannot be ignored. As Oxford says (1990: 140), "The affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure".

A balance needs to be struck between a highly structured directive approach which provides short-term security, and a more flexible approach that includes some degree of negotiation and choice but can appear more risky to the learner. It is also important to bear in mind that "while students with a lower self-esteem are those most likely to have difficulty with independent learning, they are also the group most apt to choose distance education courses (out of false impressions that they are less demanding than classroom-based ones)" (Paul, 1990: 34). They may also be the most difficult group to reach. We must, however, endeavour to find out as much as we can about our learners in order to be in a position to target their needs and respond appropriately. Diversity and distance present particular problems and are a major challenge to all those working in distance language contexts.

A number of key questions arise which point to the need for further research: How can we best communicate to distance language learners the advantages of developing appropriate metacognitive strategies? Which strategies are best for which learners and at which point? Should strategies be an integral part of course book tasks or have a separate identity? Should we assess strategy use and, if so, how and when? And finally, bearing in mind the limitations of self-report measures: which research methods would most accurately and effectively yield this information?

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PUBLICATION SEVEN

Hurd, S. (2001a) Managing and supporting language learners in open and distance learning environments. In M. Mozzon-McPherson and R. Vismans (eds) *Beyond Language Teaching towards Language Advising* (pp.135-148). CiLT in association with the University of Hull. ISBN 1-902031-81-4.

Managing and supporting language learners in open and distance learning environments

Stella Hurd • The Open University

1 Introduction

This chapter explores the nature of support for the language learner within the context of open and distance learning. It argues that, in order to be in a position to advise and support appropriately and effectively, it is necessary to address the many variables that exist in any body of learners, including beliefs and attitudes, styles and strategies, and to take these into account when designing a course for distance learners. Preliminary work in this area is reported through the findings of a study into the beliefs, strategies and attitudes to support carried out with a group of Open University (OU) students of French. Finally, it is proposed that if we are to promote an autonomous approach to distance language learning, we need to extend our research into the kinds of strategies that prove particularly effective in this context, and the links that these may have with other learner variables. Tutors and course writers should also embrace the potential of the internet to advise and support distance learners on-line, to offer new opportunities for knowledge gathering and language practice, and to encourage mutual support.

2 The context of open and distance learning

Language learning can take place anywhere: in the more formal confines of a classroom, at home in your own time, or through living in the country where the target language is spoken. While many adults prefer the more secure environment of the classroom, increasing numbers find that this is not a realistic option. Falling into this category are likely to be (1) those who live in geographically remote areas and are therefore unable to attend classes and (2) those whose time is severely limited by family and work commitments and therefore seek more flexible learning

methods. A third group can be considered to be distance learners through volition, in that they actively choose this method for a variety of reasons: they may have had negative experiences of learning, prefer the flexibility that distance learning can offer, and feel that working away from the watchful eye of the teacher, in your own time and at your own pace, is less stressful and potentially more enjoyable.

None of these groups could be said to have a particular advantage or disadvantage in terms of their learning environment. Other factors are likely, however, to have an impact on their learning, and these will include individual beliefs about language learning, together with attitudes and expectations with regard to personal achievement. While such learner variables need to be taken into account in the planning of any programme, it is perhaps even more important for course writers and tutors working in distance learning environments to be mindful of their powerful role in the learning process. It is easier in face-to-face classroom settings to get to know your learners and respond appropriately to their needs. At a distance, the task is a great deal more complex and places particular demands on all those involved.

The materials, therefore, play a central role in all open and distance learning environments as the *teaching voice*, the link between teacher and learner. In other words they must carry out all the functions of a teacher in a more conventional setting. Rowntree (1990:11) sums these up as: 'guiding, motivating, intriguing, expounding, explaining, provoking, reminding, asking questions, discussing alternative answers, appraising each learner's progress, and giving appropriate remedial help.' Particular attention needs to be paid to the design of print materials, both academic and visual, so that they are easy to follow and attractive to work with. Above all, they must be well structured with clear aims and learning outcomes, unambiguous instructions and effective navigational aids. Activities need to be sequenced very carefully so that they provide steady progression and ensure variety in the medium used (video, audio, print, CD-ROM, on-line), in the skill being practised (reading, listening, writing, speaking, translating, interpreting), in the input of grammar (when, where, how much), and in the type of activity proposed (long and demanding or short and snappy, conventional or creative, closed or open-ended). While print-based materials are likely to be the structuring force of the course, it is equally important that materials for other media are carefully designed to integrate with the rest of the course, so that the finished product is a coherent whole with a transparent structure.

This does not imply rigidity of approach. Good distance learning materials provide room for flexible interpretation of the writers' intentions, and the opportunity to choose personal pathways towards assessed outcomes. This is likely to happen anyway in an environment where learners are out of the immediate *control* of their tutors and can adopt their own preferred approach. But it is something that should be anticipated and planned for positively, in recognition of the diversity of learning

needs and styles, and the desirability for learners to construct their own learning and take responsibility for their own learning actions. Promoting autonomy in terms of encouraging and giving legitimacy to learner choice should be at the heart of any design of distance materials.

3 The nature of learner support

How can those involved in the writing or tutorial support of distance language courses best support their learners? It is a task which presents many challenges and for which there are no easy or obvious ways to respond. No assumptions can be made about types of learner, learning styles or individual preferences. The teaching voice needs to *speak* to learners of all types and be capable of appealing to any and every learner. The tone must be straightforward, without being restrictive or patronising. Distance learners are adults with experience and competence in a variety of fields and will be looking for varying degrees of support. Many lack confidence about their ability to reach the desired levels of proficiency in a second language and need the security of an authority voice. Others dislike being told what to do and prefer to be left to their own devices. All distance learners, however, need constant encouragement, and regular opportunities to reflect on their own learning and develop the capacity for self-direction. Without such opportunities, their learning is likely to be less effective.

Learner support falls into two main categories: print-based (with occasional back-up on audio for pronunciation practice) and person-based. Print-based will cover all materials designed specifically to support the learner, which will include course and study guides to support the learning process, study charts to help in planning, key learning points, self-assessment activities or checklists, and bilingual instructions in the initial stages. Careful sequencing of activities with *organisers* which tell the student what she or he is about to do and why (see Figure 1), clearly numbered step-by-step instructions, vocabulary lists and cultural notes, answer keys or models for open-ended activities, also form part of the structure of learner support. In addition, supplements aimed at specific features of learning (for example, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) can greatly assist in the diagnosis of weak areas, and provide appropriate remedial activities.

Dans l'activité qui suit, vous allez vous concentrer sur des aspects précis du documentaire. Les notes que vous allez prendre vous seront utiles pour l'activité 8.¹
(Open University 1997a:6)

Figure 1: Example of an organiser

In terms of person-support OU students may seek general guidance from Student Services who operate regionally and have staff who are trained to advise on a range of issues concerning academic study. In addition, all students have access to a designated tutor who holds monthly tutorials and most regions offer the occasional day school. Students are also strongly encouraged to set up or join existing self-help groups for mutual support and extra practice. *Mises au point*, the third French course, has sections in the course books entitled *Boîtes à idées* which give suggestions for further practice suitable for use in self-help groups (see Figure 2). The compulsory weeklong residential summer school for all students at second and third level is perhaps the most effective means for students to gain confidence in their speaking ability with the support of their tutors and fellow students. There is, therefore, a great deal of support available. However, the degree of support needed varies enormously from student to student, and students must be free to take advantage of it or not, according to their own volition.

Pour travailler votre prononciation et votre intonation, relisez le poème en changeant le ton de votre lecture. Vous pouvez exprimer des émotions différentes comme la colère, la peur, l'enthousiasme ou le mépris. Par exemple, relisez le poème à la manière de quelqu'un qui:

- a horreur de la mer (c'est très pollué);
- ne sait pas nager et traverse la Manche en canoë au cours d'une tempête;
- adore la mer, la plongée sous-marine.²

(Open University 1997b:38)

Figure 2: Example of a boîte à idée

The role of tutors should not be underestimated. As well as being competent professionals in all aspects of teaching and learning, including the use of all technologies old and new, they must be prepared to treat students as individuals and respond appropriately to the heterogeneity present in any language group. This point is well stated by Little and Singleton (1989:32–3): 'The expertise required of the teacher is no longer confined to the target language system but embraces the analysis of learners' needs and interests, [...], the stimulation and monitoring of learners' interaction with target language texts and with one another, advice on the selection of input materials, and counselling on various aspects of the learning process.'

In addition to the more practical aspects, the most effective support that tutors can give will include concrete ideas and strategies for developing learner autonomy. And this is no easy task: 'Autonomous language learning makes particular demands on the language teacher for it involves not just knowledge of its theoretical and practical possibilities and limits, but also an awareness of what it is to be a good language

learner, the metacognitive strategies needed to reach this state and how to transfer such knowledge to the learner' (Hurd 1998:227). Learners need to be shown how to reflect on their own learning styles and strategies, to become self-aware, in order to be in a position to take an active part in their own learning. A major part of the tutor's task, then, is to enable students to develop appropriate learning strategies that will lead to increased autonomy and more effective outcomes.

4 Learner beliefs and attitudes

According to Oxford (1990:140), 'the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure', a view widely held by researchers in the field, many of whom would go as far as to say that core beliefs underlie all attitudes, motivation and strategies. Stern (1987:xii), reminds us that 'adult learners are active, task-oriented, and approach their language learning with certain assumptions and beliefs which have a bearing on the way they tackle new language.' Bandura (1986:235) considers personal beliefs about self-efficacy as a proximal cause of success or failure and writes with Zimmerman (1994:859) of 'the magnitude of the contribution of self-processes to academic achievement.' It is important, therefore, to take account of the power of learners' beliefs and attitudes in the design and delivery of any language programme.

Distance learners, for whom learner independence is a defining characteristic, present a particular problem for those trying to investigate individually held beliefs. Not only are they physically remote for most or all of their learning, and therefore difficult to access, but they may also dislike any attempt to interrogate them on what might be regarded as personal matters, such as beliefs and attitudes. This is likely to be particularly the case with those who are learning at a distance from personal preference, rather than because there is no other option. Among them will be a range of learner-types, from the super-confident to the shy and tentative. Paul (1990:34) warns us that 'while students with a lower self-esteem are those most likely to have difficulty with independent learning, they are also the group most apt to choose distance education.' Such students fall into the category likely to need the most help and to benefit from some degree of tutor intervention, while at the same time shying away from it. Others, unaccustomed to reflection and self-analysis, may have considerable difficulty in providing answers to questions about beliefs, perceptions, assumptions and attitudes. As Ridley says (1997:8): 'we cannot take for granted that learners will have already reflected on their learning, nor can we assume that all learners can articulate their thoughts.' It is crucial, nevertheless, that those involved in distance set-ups endeavour to find ways of getting to know as much as possible about their learners' beliefs in order to be in a position to target their needs and respond appropriately. 'Investigation of learner beliefs, it is argued, should

enable teachers to assess their learners 'readiness' for autonomy, and then determine appropriate support for each learner' (Cotterall 1995:196).

5 Learning styles and strategies

The beliefs that learners hold are likely to be mirrored in their approach to learning and their learning style. Keefe (1979:4) defines learning styles as 'cognitive, affective and psychological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environments.' Esch (1976:73–75) cites the work of Pask in identifying two basic types of learners: *serialists* who prefer the lock-step approach and *holists* who prefer to immerse themselves in the language and try to engage with native speakers right from the beginning, however meagre their language skills. She warns that 'if you impose on learners the strategy which does not correspond to their 'type', they do not learn properly and do not retain what they have learnt.' Spolsky (1989:110) also contends that 'learning is best when the learning opportunity matches the learner's preference.'

Learning strategies also vary widely and do not automatically divide up into distinct categories, hence the efforts by many researchers (Naiman et al 1978; Oxford 1990; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Wenden 1991) to differentiate them in order to understand better their role in language learning and how they can best be taught and transferred. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classify strategies under three main headings: cognitive (applying a specific technique to a particular task, for example repeating, reasoning and analysing) metacognitive (related to the learning process, for example organising, planning and monitoring) and socio-affective (involving oneself and others, for example co-operating with peers, seeking clarification).

However, 'strategies are not good or bad in themselves, but they are only as good or bad as the use that is made of them' (Mozzon-McPherson 2000). For those learning in open and distance contexts, metacognitive strategies would, nevertheless, seem to have special significance. Drawing on Flavell's (1976:232) definition of metacognition, which covers both knowledge and skills of particular relevance to language learners, Victori and Lockhart (1995:224) define metacognitive *knowledge* as 'the general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching.' Dickinson (1992:19) highlights the *skills* aspect, and talks in terms of 'the executive', because the strategies involved in the application of metacognition are used 'to manage or control the learning process.' Open and distance language learners need to develop such skills in order to become effective learners and be in a better position to make the most of the range of opportunities open to them. O'Malley and Chamot (1990:8, 216) make the point strongly that 'students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to

plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions.' Tutors as advisers can have a very influential role here. They are without doubt the best placed to act as the human link between learner and resources. 'Self-direction does not necessarily emerge of its own accord; for most learners it needs to be fostered and developed [...] and is basically an attitude of mind on the part of the learner [...] which can be most effectively developed by the teacher.' (Carver 1984:129). For those working in open and distance learning contexts this is no easy task.

6 Findings of a study of distance language learners: Support, beliefs, difficulties, use of strategies

In order to gain more insight into specific aspects of distance language learning and variables among learners, a study was set up by the author in 1998. The study sought answers to the following questions: (1) What use do students make of learner support as provided by the course materials and tutorials? (2) What are their perceptions of the successful distance language learner and of themselves as language learners? (3) What specific difficulties do they identify with regard to distance language learning? (4) Which strategies do they use to improve their own learning and to what extent are these gender-related? Two structured questionnaires were dispatched to a random sample of 204 students enrolled on the third-stage French course *L210: Mises au point*, one in February at the start of the course and the second in June, halfway through the course. The final stage involved a small focus group of eight volunteers who had taken part in both surveys, who met with the project leader once for discussion in December after the end of the course, but before end-of-course results had been released. The findings are summarised in the following sections.³

6.1 Use of learner support materials

Attitudes to and use of support materials were investigated in both surveys, the first concentrating on the course guide⁴ and *dossier*,⁵ while the second covered all support materials. While the majority at the start of the course considered the course guide 'helpful' or 'very helpful', the figures were considerably lower for the second survey, possibly because students were needing to rely less and less on the guide as they progressed through the course. While some considered it 'necessary for distance learning', others clearly felt guides were superfluous: 'As I have always studied either at work or home, I am in the habit of studying and have evolved my own system.' The transcripts of all the audio-visual material, on the other hand, were found by 87.6% of students to be indispensable or very valuable and 77.5% gave these same ratings for the *Notes on Language and Style* ⁶ (See Figure 3).

	Course guide	Study guide	Transcripts	Notes on language and style
indispensable (1)	7.4%	7.8%	57.3%	23.6%
very valuable(2)	28.4%	23.4%	30.3%	53.9%
of some value(3)	53.1%	54.7%	12.3%	19.1%
not particularly valuable (4)	9.9%	14.1%	1.1%	3.4%
of no value(5)	1.2%	0%	0%	0%
do not use it (6)	7.8%	7.8%	1.1%	1.1%

Figure 3 Attitudes to learner support (survey 2)

Learner support in terms of tutorials revealed quite diverse attitudes. Attendance was considered extremely important by 34.8% and very important by 26.8%. Only 1.1% thought that it was not important. Some students were very positive, while others found tutorials more useful for learning how to approach assessed tasks than for anything else. Tutorials were clearly seen by many as a context for the development of socio-affective strategies to combat isolation and to practise oral skills, perceived as a major problem for distance language learners.

6.2 Beliefs about the 'good distance language learner' and factors in successful distance language learning

Two columns were provided for student responses: column 1 to tick from a given list the characteristics they believed applied to *good* distance language learners and column 2 to record which of these characteristics they felt applied to themselves. A comparison of the two sets of responses gave a useful insight into learners' beliefs and perceptions, particularly in relation to their own self-efficacy as distance language learners. The gap between the *good* distance language learner and the *actual* distance language learner was significant, particularly in relation to metacognitive skills. Organisation and time-management, including prioritising, represented a gap of over 40%; the ability to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses was slightly less at 22.5%. Being reflective, a key metacognitive process, was considered an important characteristic by only just over a third of participants (37%) and even fewer reckoned that it described their own learning (31.2%). Planning, organising, self-monitoring, reflecting, all major metacognitive skills or processes were clearly not much in evidence at the start of the course for the sample overall.

In the second survey being well-organised and being able to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses were rated high enough to be in the first half of the list, alongside motivation, persistence, self-confidence, knowledge of grammar in your own language and willingness to take risks. Analytical and planning skills, reflectiveness and initiative were rated lower, although students were certainly more aware of their value midway through the course than they had been at the start. 16.7% of students in the second survey also contributed ideas of their own concerning factors influencing successful learning, which covered a wide range: good family support, opportunities for natural exposure to the language, having a goal in mind, opportunities to practise speaking and listening, having a structure and regulated study. The focus group in discussion about whether specific skills, qualities or characteristics were needed by the successful distance language learner, were unanimous on the following: 'determination, high self-esteem, will power, guts [...].'

6.3 Difficulties and strategies

70% of the sample claimed to be experiencing difficulties. The main barriers were lack of time and few opportunities for practice with others (see Figure 4). An examination of learning strategies revealed that repeating words and phrases out loud was the most popular strategy, followed by regular testing of vocabulary. Other cognitive strategies used by students involved recording themselves speaking, making notes as they watched or listened to recordings, and keeping a log of all course-based activities that had been completed.

find it hard to assess my own progress	44.4%
find it hard to concentrate on my own/get easily distracted	14.3%
requires too much self-discipline	6.3%
takes more time than anticipated	58.7%
find it hard to remember new vocabulary	49.2%
access to video and/or TV difficult	6.3%
few opportunities for practice with others	57.1%
get easily demotivated if I don't understand something or if I get a bad mark	12.7%
feel that I make progress less rapidly than others	15.9%
don't like to ask for help	15.9%
feel overwhelmed by all the material	38.1%
other (please specify)	15.9%

Figure 4: Difficulties experienced by distance language learners (survey 2)

In terms of metacognitive strategies, allowing time for checking and double-checking TMAs (tutor-marked assignments) was the strategy most frequently cited. Half the sample set their priorities for study in advance and a third ringed 'noting down language points causing difficulty as you go along' and 'reflecting on techniques which worked best for you', a surprisingly low figure, but nonetheless one that ties in with results from the first survey which revealed that over a third of students (37%) perceived being self-aware and reflective as less important characteristics of the 'good distance language learner'. The 12.2% who cited 'other' strategies read French books, newspapers and magazines for extra practice, watched French films or listened to French radio. Others attended Adult Education classes. Additional strategies included collecting cuttings from the French press, photocopying each book's grammar points to use when revising, and highlighting relevant vocabulary and language structures.

The ratings for use of the *dossier* indicated that for at least three-quarters of the sample it was of some benefit. However, when answering the question on strategies, only 40% of the sample claimed to actually use ideas from the *dossier* sections in the course books. The highest readings indicated use as an aid to revision. Others focused on more cognitive uses: acquiring vocabulary, improving style and focusing on particular language structures. Fewer students used it to develop metacognitive strategies: gaining more control over learning, improving study habits, assessing language strengths and weaknesses. They clearly needed more help with this. Time was again the overriding factor in explaining negative attitudes to use of the *dossier*. This supports a general view that 'time pressures work against those experimenting with their learning strategies' (Murphy 1998). In general, students tended to perceive the *dossier* as an optional extra rather than as a key element in the development of effective learning strategies. This view was confirmed in discussion with the focus group who found that the frequent mention of the *dossier* caused 'additional stress' in an already very busy schedule of work. The unambiguous message is that students need to be shown more clearly and with more concrete examples why and how developing metacognitive strategies through the use of a *dossier* can help promote more effective learning and save time. It should, nevertheless, be mentioned that more students in the second survey found the *dossier* extremely or very useful (38.2%) than found it not very useful or not at all useful (23.6%).

7 Developing independent approaches to learner support and strategy use

The second survey included an open-ended section for students who felt they had improved as a language learner to indicate in what way(s). An encouraging 60% of participants chose to respond. Many of their comments indicated increased

metacognitive awareness and the use of metacognitive strategies: 'better at prioritising'; 'better organised'; 'better at time-management'; 'improved in ability to assess my own strengths and weaknesses and seek help'. This ties in with Garner's (1988) contention that 'to make an individual metacognitively aware is to ensure that the individual has learned how to learn.' The 40% who did not give any feedback are a reminder, however, that there are no grounds for complacency. While there are numerous reasons why they remained silent, including probably lack of time, it is nevertheless highly likely that among them were some who clearly did not cope well and needed more support and guidance in order to develop their own strategies for learning.

'Learners develop strategies for solving problems in their own way and in their own time' (Ridley 1997:42). In order to do this, they need encouragement and reassurance, a wide variety of suggested strategies to try out in order to find what works for them personally, strategy training if the context allows, prompts to notice what strategies they are using in relation to a particular task, and regular opportunities through their learning to develop metacognitive awareness. Encouraging learners to confront their own metacognitive knowledge, develop a reflective approach, believe in their own self-efficacy as learners, and seek help when needed should be a prime aim for all those working in open and distance learning. There is no reason why this should not happen through the course materials and in particular through more integrated use of the *dossier* and more attention to the kinds of strategies particular learning tasks might promote.

There is also a great deal that learners can do to support themselves. Self-help groups are one obvious way of providing mutual support, use of the internet is another, particularly for those confined to the home. email is increasingly being used by students to contact each other and their tutor. The internet also offers exciting challenges for learning through interaction with a tutor on a one-to-one or a one-to-many basis. The Department of Languages at the UK Open University has piloted LEXICA⁷ with third-stage French students and FLUENT⁸ with French and German students at different levels. Feedback has been extremely positive and is likely to lead in the very near future to a more integrated use of on-line learning opportunities.

8 Conclusion

This chapter has given some insight into the nature of support in the specific context of open and distance language learning. The face-to-face contact that language advising in campus-based universities can offer is not available to distance learners, nor do they have the same opportunities for interaction with other learners, both for

practice and mutual support. Support through materials is therefore a crucial factor for learners in the development of metacognitive awareness and autonomous practice. The findings of the study with OU language learners are useful in particular for the gaps they reveal in our present knowledge on learner support. This points to the need for further research into strategies, in particular (1) which strategies work best in independent contexts, (2) which strategies are best for which learners and at which point, (3) how strategies can best be developed and applied and (4) if/how we should assess strategy use. McDonough (1999:4) is of the view that there needs to be a more thorough investigation into the relationship between strategy use and language proficiency, particularly in terms of transfer. He also points to the lack of clarity over 'what strategies, if any, learners adopt to extract general lessons they can use to improve their next piece' (McDonough 1999:7) and reminds us of the difficulty of advising on strategy use, because of the number of variables which need to be taken into account. There also needs to be a fuller investigation into what links there might be between beliefs and strategy use and how these might impact on learning outcomes. The tension between highly structured courses such as those prepared for distance language learning and the flexibility that learner autonomy implies also needs more detailed analysis.

The role of the tutor will certainly continue to change and evolve, as more and more learning opportunities become available to those in open and distance learning environments, particularly with the rapid increase in on-line delivery and support. Access to the internet is already changing the face of language teaching and learning and offers distinct advantages to distance language learners, specifically for interactive speaking practice and for mutual support. At the same time, the emphasis on quality assurance procedures and scrutiny through audit will require innovatory practice in teaching and learning to continue to meet the highest standards.

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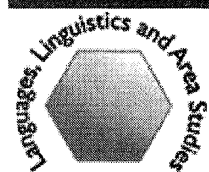
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Notes

- 1 'In the following activity you will be concentrating on specific aspects of the video documentary. The notes you take will be useful for Activity 8.'
- 2 'To work on your pronunciation and intonation, read the poem again changing the tone of your voice. You can express different emotions such as anger, fear, enthusiasm or scorn. For example, read the poem as if you were someone who loathes the sea (it's very polluted); can't swim and is crossing the Channel in a canoe during a storm; loves the sea, deep-sea diving.'
- 3 Full details of the study and its findings are published in Hurd (2000).
- 4 A 24-page supplement which explains the content of the course, the assessment process and how to get the most from your studies.
- 5 To help in the development of strategy use and encourage autonomy, students are advised to develop a *dossier* which might take the form of an exercise book or loose-leaf folder, a card index or a file on computer, and in which they note down whatever they feel might be helpful to them in their learning. Students are given general advice on how to do this, initially in the course guide and then in sections entitled *dossier* throughout the course books, which gradually build up suggestions for developing a wide range of strategies. These might include ideas for organising and categorising, planning and monitoring, prioritising and making the most of the resources within and outside the course.
- 6 Seven supplements, one to accompany each course book.
- 7 A pilot project to support foreign language learning, which involves the use of specially designed stand-alone software for learning vocabulary at home, supported by tutorial and peer-group discussion via an on-line forum. First used with third-stage French learners, it has now been adapted and extended for level one users.
- 8 A synchronous audio conferencing system which allows tutors to run a seminar in real time and students to interact in pairs or small groups. It has been extended through the use of Lyceum, which allows participants to post pictures, texts, etc on screen.

PUBLICATION EIGHT

Hurd, S. (2002) Taking account of individual learner differences in the planning and delivery of language courses for open, distance and independent learning. CILT, University of Manchester 24-26 June 2002. Web conference proceedings. Available from: <http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/conferenceitem.aspx?resourceid=1315>

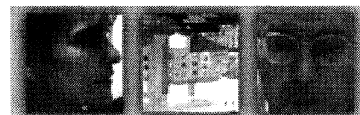


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24-26 June 2002, Manchester Conference Centre, UMIST



Taking account of affective learner differences in the planning and delivery of language courses for open, distance and independent learning

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Abstract

The affective side of language learning has been attracting more and more attention in recent years. Results from studies carried out with undergraduate language learners in the late 1990s into affect in language learning have indicated 'substantial links among affective measures and achievement' (Gardner, Tremblay and Masgoret, 1997: 344) and have highlighted the 'interdependent role that linguistics, cognition and affect play in FL and SL learning' (Yang, 1999: 246). However, most research on affective learner variables concentrates on classroom-based learners, and there is very little on those learning in other contexts. This paper therefore: reviews the literature on affective variables and its relevance for independent language learning contexts; examines some of the interrelationships between affective variables, and their links with cognitive styles and strategies; explores briefly the issues raised with regard to pedagogic intervention in independent learning contexts and the development of learner autonomy.

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Introduction

The affective side of language learning has been attracting more and more attention in recent years. Results from studies carried out with undergraduate language learners in the late 1990s into affect in language learning have indicated 'substantial links among affective

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- reviews the literature on affective variables and its relevance for independent language learning contexts;
- examines some of the interrelationships between affective variables, and their links with cognitive styles and strategies;
- explores briefly the issues raised with regard to pedagogic intervention in independent learning contexts and the development of learner autonomy.

Although open and distance language learning is the point of reference, the findings are, for the most part, equally relevant to self-access and other types of learning that take place outside the classroom, whether at home, in a Language Centre or through tandem exchanges.

The first part of the paper examines motivation, introversion, extroversion and risk-taking, anxiety and beliefs, and the learning context. Styles and strategies are then discussed, with a closer look at the ways in which variables are seen to interact with each other to promote successful learning. Finally, implications for course writers and tutors are addressed.

Motivation

For those learning outside the conventional classroom, motivation has a special and direct role. In the case of distance learning, it is often the determining factor in whether to study or not. The majority of OU language learners are highly motivated. Their motivations are largely intrinsic, although these can and often do become more extrinsic and instrumental or at least more focused, as aspirations to achieve higher qualifications begin to emerge. Although motivation, according to Dörnyei, (2001: 2) remains 'one of the most elusive concepts', the extensive body of research with relation to language learning carried out over three decades, (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Naiman et al, 1978; Crookes and Schmidt, 1991; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993, Oxford and Shearin, 1994; Dörnyei, 2001) would seem to confirm that attitudes and motivation are in many instances the best overall predictors of success in language learning.

For independent learners, the inherently demanding nature of self-instruction, together with the shift of locus of control from teacher to learner, implies that only those who maintain their levels of motivation are likely to succeed, and this was borne out in a study I carried out with distance language learners in 1998 (Hurd, 2000). At the start of their course, 89.1% of them considered motivation to be a characteristic of the 'good distance language learner'. Halfway through the course, an even higher percentage - 98.9% - saw motivation, along with persistence, as equally important factors influencing successful distance language learning. Demotivation was caused by factors related to the distance learning situation, for example lack of opportunity to practise with others and share experiences, frustration at unresolved problems with aspects of the language, difficulty in assessing personal progress and perceived inadequacy of feedback. What came over strongly was the ease with which students can lose motivation and the frustration that can set in when obstacles are met. These comments give a clear message to course writers to ensure that materials give: crystal clear explanations, help with self-monitoring, ideas for practice and high quality feedback.

Extroversion, introversion and risk-taking

With regard to the personality traits of extroversion and introversion, Skehan's analysis (1989: 101) found that there was 'something of a conflict between general learning predictions in this area, and language learning predictions'. Extroverts, it would seem, because of their outgoing and impulsive nature have 'the appropriate personality trait for language learning (as distinct from general, content-oriented learning) since such learning is best accomplished, according to most theorists, by actually using language'. Introverts,

on the other hand, appear to perform better in subjects other than language learning. Studies have not, however, confirmed this link, and have indeed found positive correlation between introversion and certain metacognitive skills on the part of language learners, such as planning, monitoring and systematicity. Introverts are also seen, according to Dewaele, (2001: 155) to 'possess a better Long Term Memory and [...] a richer vocabulary'. If there is any link, it is likely to be in the oral domain (Rossier, 1976, cited in Skehan, 1989, p.102), and classroom practice would seem to confirm this. Extrovert students tend to participate more in classroom interactions, worry less about accuracy and have a tendency to take risks with their language, all of which are assets when it comes to communicative oral competence. For language learners outside the classroom, those with high levels of confidence and who are outgoing in their nature are most likely to fit the profile above. According to my survey, they are also likely to be men. 64% of the men, as opposed to 46.4% of the women, claimed to make use of any language practice opportunities that came their way. A third of the men (33.3%) also considered themselves to be self-confident, against a quarter of the women (25.3%). Extroversion, as we have seen, may well have a role to play in the development of oral skills, but introversion may be of even more significance for the independent language learner, given its positive correlation with metacognitive skills and their link with autonomy.

Anxiety

According to Guiora quoted in Ehrman (1999: 78): 'the task of learning a new language is a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition'. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1991: 31) also contend that 'probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does'. Anxiety, then 'ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal or formal' (Oxford, 1999: 59). Studies into anxiety in language learning have focused on 'a type of anxiety related specifically to language situations, termed language anxiety' (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993: 5). This is seen as 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors [...] arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process' (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986, p.128) which 'does not appear to bear a strong relation to other forms of anxiety' (MacIntyre, 1999: 30). Findings from studies indicate that language anxiety is negatively related to achievement in the L2 and is associated with 'deficits in listening comprehension, impaired vocabulary learning, reduced word production, low scores on standardized tests, low grades in language courses or a combination of these factors' (Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret, 1997: 345). The effects of anxiety are described as 'pervasive and subtle' (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994: 283) and can 'influence both language learning and communication processes' (MacIntyre, 1999: 24). Like motivation, there is a link between anxiety and proficiency levels, with anxiety levels often at their highest early on in language learning, and then declining as proficiency increases (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993: 6). This is true of distance language learners too, who, according to White (1995: 208), report 'initial feelings of lack of preparedness and lack of confidence and a sense of inadequacy'.

While anxiety can be a factor in language learning in all contexts, if we are to believe Ross Paul (1990), there are more likely to be anxious learners outside than inside the classroom: 'While students with a lower self-esteem are those most likely to have difficulty with independent learning, they are also the group most apt to choose distance education courses (out of false impressions that they are less demanding than classroom-based ones)'. Distance language learners do have more choices however, including whether to attend tutorials and mix with other learners or not. They are therefore spared, at least until the oral examination, one known anxiety-inducing factor - live performance in the foreign language in front of others.

Beliefs and learning context

All learners come to their studies with their own particular beliefs, assumptions and expectations about the language learning process and about themselves as learners. According to a survey done for the European Year of Languages 2001, '22% of the EU population do not learn languages because they believe they are "not good" at them'.

Cotterall (1995: 195) maintains that 'the beliefs and attitudes learners hold have a profound influence on their learning behaviour' and that 'teachers and materials writers need to be aware of, and sensitive to students' pre-existing assumptions about the language learning process' (1999: 496). With regard to distance learners, White (1999: 444) also contends that 'attention to expectations and beliefs can contribute to our understanding of the realities of the early stages of self-instruction in language'

Learning context is increasingly cited as a key factor influencing other factors in language learning. The separate studies undertaken in 1999 by Benson and Lor, Victori, and Sakui and Gaies, all stress the importance of context in influencing beliefs and attitudes. White (1999, p.449) goes further in identifying 'the relationship between the learner and the context as the critical aspects of self-instruction' with 'each exerting an influence on the other'. She cites the 'metacognitive growth' experienced by most participants in her study, maintaining that the distance learning context itself influences them to develop their knowledge about themselves as learners, and extend their skills. In my own study, students' comments at the end of the course were also evidence of 'metacognitive growth'. Some talked of 'increased self-confidence' and of being 'more assertive in conversation'; others claimed to be 'more willing to take risks and make mistakes'. There is a danger, however, that the less confident, the anxious and the reticent may slip through the net and drop out. To these students in particular we have a responsibility to ensure that the learning context, including the course materials and the quality of tutor feedback, is as conducive as possible to effective learning from the start.

Styles and strategies

One learner variable that continues to attract much attention is learning style. More recently, work on learning strategies has identified a close link with learning styles. Cohen (1998: 15) contends that 'learning strategies do not operate by themselves, but rather are directly tied to the learner's underlying learning styles [...] and other personality-related variables (such as anxiety and self-concept) in the learner [...]'. Dickinson (1990: 200) also talks of a likely 'relationship between cognitive style and preferred learning processes and strategies in language learning'. Ellis' case study of two adult German ab initio learners (1992: 175-189) confirms that 'learners do benefit if the instruction suits their learning style' but he asks: 'are learning styles fixed or do they change as acquisition proceeds?' (174). A consensus has yet to emerge, though there is evidence from Oxford, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1993; Cohen, 1998 and Skehan, 1998 that preferences and styles can change as learners gain proficiency, or in response to pedagogic intervention in the form of strategy training.

Interrelationships

One of the debatable points about many learner variables is indeed the extent to which they are amenable to change, and if so, at what point and in what way. Larsen-Freeman (2001: 20) argues that 'it is conceivable that as we search for an advanced conceptualisation of learner factors, we will also find that they are not only mutable, but that they also vary in their influence, depending on the learner's stage of acquisition'. If preferences and styles can change over time, then it would seem likely that other factors such as beliefs, motivation and levels of anxiety and self-confidence can also be modified. The causal agent, however, is not easy to identify. For example, in the case of motivation, Ellis (1985, 1999: 119) warns that 'we do not know whether it is motivation that produces successful learning, or successful learning that enhances motivation'. Ushioda (1996: 10) talks of the 'increasingly sophisticated research methods to investigate causal direction' and the 'vicious or virtuous circles of cause and effect that may characterize learning experience'.

For those learning in independent contexts, autonomy is another important factor in the motivation-success chain. Dickinson (1995: 171) maintains that 'success in learning [...] appears to lead to greater motivation only for those students who accept responsibility for their own learning success'. Ushioda (1996: 2) confirms this link: 'autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners'.

Gardner's original socio-education model of second-language acquisition 'explicitly proposes reciprocal causation' (1993: 2) between individual differences, contexts and outcomes, with particular emphasis given to the 'very dominant role played by the social context' (8). Later adaptations of the model (1993) show 'causal links from language anxiety and motivation to language learning strategies'. Gardner's extended 1995 model produced with Tremblay introduces three variables mediating between attitudes and behaviour: goal salience which includes frequency and specificity of goals, valence i.e. the desire to learn and attitudes towards the L2, and self-efficacy, including anxiety. In this model the paths run from attitudes to motivational behaviour to achievement, though in the discussion section reciprocal paths are not ruled out. Oxford and Nyikos (1989: 295) talk of a 'chain of variables': 'We would expect that use of appropriate strategies leads to enhanced actual and perceived proficiency, which in turn creates high self-esteem, which leads to strong motivation, spiralling to still more use of strategies, great actual and perceived proficiency, high self-esteem, improved motivation and so on'. The results of Yang's 1999 study (515-535) also suggest a cyclical rather than a uni-directional relationship between learners' beliefs, motivation and strategy use.

Strategy development in OU language courses

Benson (2001: 68) is of the opinion that 'to date [...] research does not provide conclusive evidence on the mutability of individual variables in learning, their interrelationships, or the role of experience, training and self-control in change' But in the absence of conclusive evidence one way or another on the effectiveness of strategy development, and guided by the needs of distance learners for support in developing their own approaches, OU language course writers do make serious efforts to integrate learning strategies into the materials. Practical suggestions are to be found in the French courses where, at level 1, *Learning strategies* and *study skills* sections, and at Levels 2 and 3, Dossier sections, regularly feed in examples of strategies, with suggestions for their use. Students at lower levels are also encouraged to review what they have learned at regular intervals and to re-do activities or try out strategies suggested, if they haven't already done so. The Boîtes à idées (French) and Más práctica (Spanish) sections offer ideas for further practice and opportunities for transfer to individual contexts. Pensándolo bien language awareness activities in Spanish encourage learners to reflect on what they already know, and make connections. Practical guidance in the development of specific language skills, for example reading, is to be found in the German courses. The Spanish Diario sections invite students to comment on aspects of their learning. In all courses, students are encouraged to experiment in order to determine which strategies work best for them.

The answer key section, which is the end-section of each course book also contains material that addresses the learner directly, and attempts to anticipate differences in interpretation and approach, and possible confusions and difficulties with regard to the activities learners have undertaken. The language has to be carefully chosen so as not to undermine or patronize; it must be concise, easily accessible and to the point, so that it doesn't cause students to switch off. The path between supporting students on the one hand, and being too prescriptive or directive on the other, is a difficult one to tread, all the more so when you do not know your learners. It is part of the tension described by McDonough (1999: 12) as the 'double-edged relation between teaching people to learn and learner autonomy'

In addition to the materials there is the tutor who also has a crucial role to play. Each OU student is assigned a tutor at the start of the course and although tutorials are not compulsory, many OU students do attend them and for some they are the most important and enjoyable part of the course. By employing methods that lower what Krashen terms as the 'affective filter' - reducing anxiety, identifying and praising progress, pinpointing areas of concern with sensitivity, and boosting confidence - the tutor can help maintain motivation levels. She or he can also influence the use of different strategies, encouraging reluctant students to try things out, take a few risks, learn to reflect on their learning, take responsibility and monitor their progress. Reminding individual students of the strategies they have already used to motivate themselves at different times is also an important tutor task. For all learners, especially those who do not attend tutorials, the tutor at a distance

has a pivotal role in providing feedback on assessed work, with full explanations of how marks have been allotted, constructive criticism in a supportive framework and concrete suggestions for improving language and learning skills. She or he might also be the catalyst for the setting up of local self-help groups which students manage themselves and use to practise the language in an informal social context.

Conclusion

Larsen-Freeman (2001: 24) argues that 'we need more holistic research that links integrated individual difference research [...] to the processes, mechanisms and conditions of learning within different contexts over time'. The complex nature of the language learning process and the range and breadth of variables that can influence language acquisition indicate that there is considerable scope for further studies, particularly in relation to independent learning contexts. Increasing diversity in the student population, through widening participation, new technologies and new, more cost-efficient practices in course production are forcing a re-think of current activity and providing a challenge to all those involved in the design and delivery of learning constantly to seek out ways of ensuring that the needs of our language learners are met. Most important of all is that we resist what Skehan terms as a 'conspiracy of uniformity' (1998: 260) by making assumptions about the needs of language learners, and that we take positive steps to 'explore just how instruction can be adapted to take account of the person who is most involved, the actual learner' (281).

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PUBLICATION NINE

Hauck, M. and Hurd, S. (2005) Exploring the link between language anxiety and learner self-management in face-to-face and virtual language learning contexts.

European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning (EURODL), II. ISSN 1027

5207. Available from:

http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2005/Mirjam_Hauck.htm



Exploring the link between language anxiety and learner self-management in open language learning contexts

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Abstract

Learning a language is said to implicate self-concept in a way that does not occur in other disciplines, and to entail a particular kind of anxiety related only to language situations (see Gardner & Mac Intyre, 1993; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, 1991). To date, however, research into affective learner variables such as anxiety, self-confidence and motivation and their impact on learner performance has concentrated on classroom-based learners. There are fewer studies that examine the special situation of those studying in a distance context (see Hurd 2000, 2002, 2005; Hurd, Beaven & Ortega 2001; White 1994, 1995, 1999) and - to our knowledge - none considering these factors within virtual distance language learning environments. White (1995) stresses that their need for self-direction requires distance learners to develop a comparatively higher degree of metacognitive knowledge - especially their self-knowledge. Her findings also reveal that distance learners make greater use of metacognitive strategies - particularly self-management - and affective strategies than do classroom learners. Here too, investigations taking virtual language learning contexts into account are scant (see Hauck, 2005). Based on the evaluation of data from two studies carried out at the Open University this paper seeks to explore the interrelationship between affective learner variables in particular language anxiety and, learner self-knowledge and management in face-to-face as well as virtual settings.

Keywords

Distance language learning, language anxiety, self-knowledge, self-management, face-to-face settings, virtual learning spaces

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Introduction

The Department of Languages at the Open University/UK was set up in 1991 and presented its first course in French for lower intermediate learners^[1] in 1995. Intensive course production over a number of years has resulted in a portfolio of courses from beginner to degree level in French, German and Spanish. Language learning resources are varied and include print, video and audio materials as well as ICT components such as, for example, course websites. All students are individually assigned a tutor who advises on learning, marks coursework and holds tutorials. Until recently all tutorials took place face-to-face in the Open University's regional centres throughout the UK and Continental Western Europe, but since 2002 tutorials for some courses have been conducted online using *Lyceum*, an Internet-based conferencing system originally developed by the university's Knowledge Media Institute which provides multiple synchronous audio channels as well as synchronous text chat and several shared graphic interfaces (for a more detailed description of the tool see Hauck & Hampel, 2005). As a result of the continuing success of this tutorial mode the Department of Languages now offers a choice of face-to-face or *Lyceum*-based tuition to all students.

This paper seeks to enhance our understanding of the interrelationship between affective issues, language anxiety in particular, and successful learner self-management in these learning environments. The findings are based on two *phenomenographic* studies, with the first one on language anxiety prompting the second one which explores the role of successful learner self-management. After some background information about the Open University's approach to distance education in general and the Department of Languages' approach to teaching languages at a distance in particular, this article looks at the theory underpinning the phenomena of language anxiety and learner self-management. This is followed by a presentation of the aforementioned studies, a discussion of their results and some preliminary conclusions.

Learning a Language at a Distance: Learners and Learner Support

Learning any subject in distance mode has its own specific challenges, not least the need to develop self-awareness and acquire good self-management skills as part of developing autonomy as defined by Hurd *et al.* (2001) in their investigation of strategy instruction and learner support in relation to distance language learning. They stress that conscious selection of strategies and self-directed involvement are characteristics of an autonomous approach, and particularly relevant to those learning in independent contexts. How, then, does the Department of Languages at the Open University UK attempt to develop autonomy in its learners, while at the same time responding to the need for good support mechanisms?

Firstly, the materials play a central role as the teaching voice, the link between teacher and learner. Distinctive features are structured learning with explicit aims, objectives and learning outcomes, and activities to give practice and encourage reflection. Activities are carefully sequenced to provide steady progression and ensure variety in type, skill, grammatical/style focus. To help students develop awareness of themselves in the learning process and encourage an autonomous approach, learning strategy sections are embedded into the courses and thus reflect an indirect and contextualised approach to strategy training. The aim is gradually to shift the locus of control from teacher to learner and build learners' confidence in taking an active part in their own learning.

Tutorials are not compulsory but those who attend when they can consider them to be an integral part of their learning. For these students, the face-to-face element, however irregular, is crucial for developing confidence and fluency, interacting in the target language along with the visual clues and cues that the presence of others can give and getting instant feedback. In order to provide more flexible speaking opportunities for all learners and to cater more specifically for those who do not or cannot attend the face-to-face tutorials, online tuition via *Lyceum* is a serious alternative. But can tutorials online offer the same level and quality of

support as those conducted face to face? Do they have other advantages or disadvantages?

Building on earlier studies (Hauck & Haezwindt, 1999; Shield & Hewer, 1999; Shield, Hauck & Hewer, 2001), more recent studies (Hampel & Hauck, 2004) examined these questions and in particular the challenge of implementing online tuition in a distance learning setting, including pedagogic rationale, activity design, tutor training and student support. Findings highlighted the number and complexity of the issues involved, in particular those relating to the technology used and how these affected student behaviour and motivation. Hampel and Hauck (2004) stress that a great deal of practice and training is required in order to optimally exploit the special affordances offered by a multimodal system such as *Lyceum*. Among the areas to be prioritised when setting up online tuition in an audio-graphic environments they mention training of tutors, arrangements for adequate ICT support, (including induction and setting up and maintaining comprehensive online help), initial and ongoing communication to manage student expectations, clarity to students in channelling queries (e.g., all technical enquiries to be directed to helpdesk, all academic enquiries to tutor), and an ongoing evaluation of task design.

The studies that are the focus of this paper complement that research by investigating the nature and extent of anxiety among distance language learners and the role of self-knowledge and self-management in dealing – among other things – with affective difficulties such as anxiety. Why is it, then, that anxiety is seen to have particular relevance to language learning?

Language Anxiety

Research into anxiety in language learning has a history spanning over three decades (Curran, 1976; Gardner *et al.*, 1976; Kleinmann, 1977; Stevick, 1980). According to Guiora (1983, p. 8), "the task of learning a new language is a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition", a view reinforced by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1991, p. 31) who contend that "probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does". Research has focused on a type of anxiety termed language anxiety that is seen as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors [...] arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 128) and which "does not appear to bear a strong relation to other forms of anxiety" (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 30). Language anxiety is said to have a 'subtle' and 'pervasive' effect on cognitive processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Oxford, 1999) and to be associated with "deficits in listening comprehension, impaired vocabulary learning, reduced word production, low scores on standardized tests, low grades in language courses or a combination of these factors" (Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret, 1997, p. 345). In response to their critics (notably Sparks & Ganschow, 1995, 2000) who do not accept a causal relationship between anxiety and learning, MacIntyre (1995a, 1995b, 1999) in the 90s and, more recently, Horwitz, (2000, 2001) strongly argue that anxiety is a multifaceted variable that can be both a *cause* and a *consequence* of poor language learning and remind us (Horwitz, 2000, p. 256) that "the potential of anxiety to interfere with learning and performance is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and education".

The majority of studies into language anxiety refer to classroom-based learning and there is little that specifically investigates anxiety in the distance context. Apart from the work of Hauck (2005), Harris (2003), Hurd (2000, 2002), Hurd *et al.* (2001), and White (1995, 1997, 1999), to date, there also seems to be little published research about the link between affective factors such as anxiety and meta-cognitive strategies such as learner self-management taking into account the particular situation of those studying at a distance. Distance learners are, however, said to make more use of meta-cognitive strategies than do classroom-based learners, self-management being the most frequently used (White, 1995).

The first study presented in this paper, therefore, attempts to fill this gap through an investigation of language anxiety at a distance and the strategies students use to address it. The second study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between self-knowledge and self-management in distance learning both in more traditional

contexts and in virtual learning spaces such as *Lyceum*.

Learner Self-Management

The demands and opportunities of a distance learning context make it necessary for students to re-evaluate their role(s) and responsibilities as language learners and their need for self-direction requires them to develop a comparatively higher degree of metacognitive knowledge, particularly in terms of self- or person knowledge (White, 1995). This is confirmed by Hurd *et al.* (2001) who describe the dilemma of these learners as follows: Not only do they have to find out by trial and error which strategies seem to work for them; they also have to learn the skills of assessing their individual learning needs, including their strengths and weaknesses as learners. Thus they have to be self-aware and knowledgeable about their own perceptions, attitudes and abilities. At the same time, course writers and tutors are faced with a particular challenge, given that they are not 'in touch' with the learners and cannot easily find out about them in order to support them.

Recent studies of learning strategies emphasise the importance of enabling learners to understand and then manage not only their repertoire of strategies but also their learning patterns, attitudes and feelings (Wenden, 1995; Butler, 1997; Rubin, 2001). Hauck (2005) takes this notion a step further to include online learners. She contends that the degree to which language learners are aware of both themselves - their attitudes, aptitudes and beliefs - and of the affordances of the learning environment, and the degree to which they demonstrate control and flexibility in the use of metacognitive strategies such as self-management are interdependent.

Successful learner self-management (LSM) is a strong indicator of a high level of metacognitive knowledge in learners, i.e. awareness of the circumstances in which they, as individuals, learn best, and possession of the skills necessary to create those conditions. According to White (1995, p. 215), "self-management takes place when learners draw on their understanding of how they learn best to set up the learning conditions which they have found to be favourable [...] to manage their interactions with the TL (Target Language)". This perception of LSM reflects O'Malley and Chamot's (1990, p. 137) definition in their taxonomy of language learning strategies, i.e. "understanding the conditions that help one successfully accomplish language tasks and arranging for the presence of those conditions." Yet, considering the situation of distance language learners, particularly those operating in virtual spaces, Hauck (2005, p.73) calls for a slightly more comprehensive definition of self-management: "understanding the conditions that help successfully to accomplish language tasks in independent and virtual learning contexts and arranging for the presence of those conditions in such contexts". Such a wider notion of self-management, that is one which takes the learning environment into account, can be found in Rubin's (2001) Interaction Model of LSM where she illustrates the complex dynamic processes between the learning task, the procedures for LSM (planning, monitoring, evaluating, problem-solving and implementing) and LSM knowledge and beliefs. The latter include self-knowledge, strategic knowledge and prior knowledge such as, for example, contextual knowledge about setting and situation, i.e. about the learning environment.

Rubin and Thompson (1994) look at ways in which knowledge and use of strategies - particularly metacognitive and affective strategies - influence language learning. They note the interdependence between, on the one hand, a low 'affective filter' and thus low anxiety levels and on the other, improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation resulting in improved performance. Accordingly Rubin (2001, p. 26) characterizes skilled self-managed learners as those who "possess sufficient knowledge and appropriate well-developed beliefs about self, the learning process, possible strategies, the nature of tasks, and prior knowledge" and who are able "to access their knowledge and beliefs in order to orchestrate their use of procedures". She takes the task as the starting point for her considerations about successfully self-managed learning. At times affective strategies and self-management overlap in that the former "serve to regulate emotions, motivation and attitudes (e.g. strategies for reduction of anxiety and for self-encouragement)" (Cohen, 1998, p. 8). In a new approach the two studies described in the next section focus on the self and the learning context.

The Studies

In 2003 and 2003/2004 two studies were carried out with Open University language learners based on a so-called phenomenographic research approach which is described as "the finding and systematising of thought in terms of which people interpret significant aspects of reality" and "aims at description, analysis and understanding of experiences" (Marton, 1981, quoted in White, 1999). The first study investigated language anxiety among learners supported by face-to-face tutorials. The second study included online as well as face-to-face learners in its investigation of affective and contextual factors, and focused in particular on language anxiety and LSM skills.

Study 1: Language Anxiety

The study into language anxiety was part of a wider longitudinal study investigating a range of affective variables including anxiety, motivation and beliefs among a group of distance language learning students registered on L120 Ouverture, a French course for students at lower intermediate level. There were three intervention points during the course which ran from February to October: Questionnaire 1 was administered in February at the start of the course, Questionnaire 2 in June at the midway point; and one-to-one recorded telephone interviews were held in November at the end of the course.

With regard to language anxiety, the study aimed to extend existing knowledge gained in face-to-face learning environments to the distance context, and to find out what, if any strategies those students experiencing anxiety were using after four months of study. The first of the two questionnaires was sent out to a random sample of 500 subjects selected by the Open University's Institute of Technology (IET) at the start of the course from the 2003 cohort of learners. 277 students responded i.e. 55% of the overall sample. The second questionnaire (n = 277) achieved a response rate of 52%, i.e. 145 responses. Questionnaire 1 aimed to elicit some preliminary information at the start of the course on student beliefs about anxiety in relation to learning a language as opposed to other subjects, and whether the distance element was a factor in raising or lowering levels of anxiety. Questionnaire 2 probed the concept of language anxiety in more depth, exploring further its nature and extent after four months of study. It included questions on specific language tasks that made students feel anxious and on the use of affective strategies to deal with anxiety. The questionnaires included Lickert-type and yes/no questions, selecting and ranking activities, and some open-ended questions for qualitative analysis.

We report findings of the two questionnaires as related to the following research questions on language anxiety:

1. Are there any elements of the language learning process which distance learners associate with anxiety?
2. What are the strategies that distance language learners deploy to cope with anxiety?

In Questionnaire 1, students were asked if they thought there was anything specific to language learning as opposed to learning other subjects that might cause anxiety, and to give details. 84% responded yes and most included speaking as a major cause of anxiety. This was probed further in the second questionnaire, where features related to oral performance were cited more widely than other possible causes of anxiety, in particular 'freezing' when called upon to speak, which was also considered the 'most important' cause of anxiety by nearly a third of respondents. The full range of activities, thoughts or states that students identified as associated with anxiety is shown in Table 1 'Causes of anxiety' below, in descending order. The numbers in the left column represent the random order in which the items were originally placed in the question. Figure 1 'Most important cause of anxiety' shows the particular item students considered most significant in its association with anxiety.

Table 1. Questionnaire 2: All causes of anxiety

Causes of anxiety (n=145)		All %
6	'Freezing' when called upon to speak	41.4
8	Remembering vocabulary	41.4
5	Worrying about my accent	37.2
7	Getting to grips with grammar	33.1
11	Realising how much work it takes to learn a language	32.4
3	Fear of not being understood	30.3
2	Fear of making mistakes	27.6
12	Not making progress quickly enough	24.1
9	Wanting to translate every word but finding it doesn't help	20.7
4	Fear of critical reaction from others	20.7
10	Discovering that another language does not follow the same patterns as my own language	11.7
13	Not matching up to the expectations of others	8.3
14	Feeling too much is expected of me	8.3
15	Other	2.8
1	Negative experiences of learning a language at school	2.1

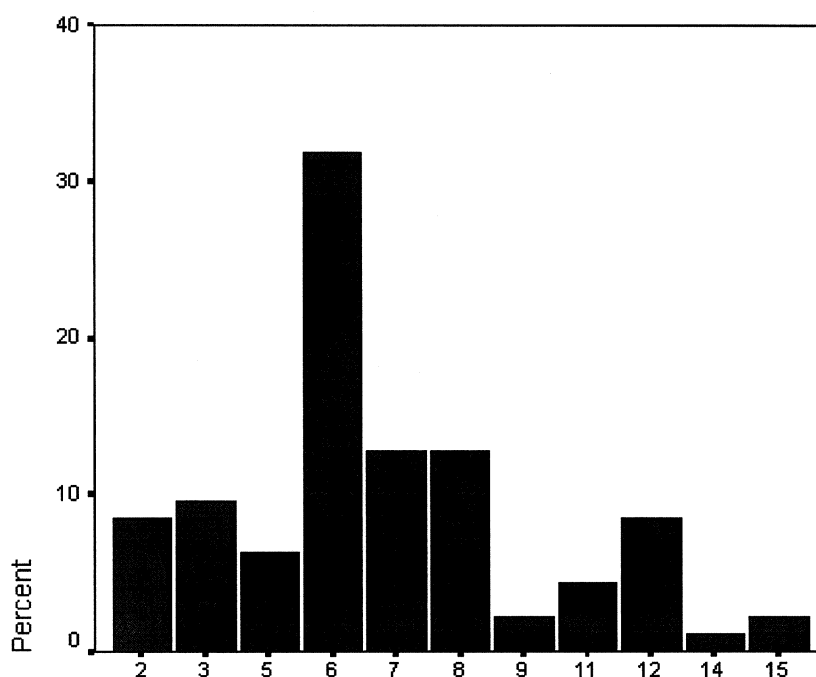


Figure 1. Questionnaire 2: Most important cause of anxiety

- 1. = Negative experiences of learning a language at school *
- 2. = Fear of making mistakes
- 3. = Fear of not being understood

4. = Fear of critical reaction from others *
5. = Worrying about my accent
6. = 'Freezing' when called upon to speak
7. = Getting to grips with grammar
8. = Remembering vocabulary
9. = Wanting to translate every word but finding it doesn't help
10. = Discovering that another language does not follow the same patterns as my own language *
11. = Realizing how much work it takes to learn a language
12. = Not making progress quickly enough
13. = Not matching up to the expectations of others *
14. = Feeling too much is expected of me
15. = Other

Students were asked in Questionnaire 1 if they felt more or less anxious about learning a language at a distance than in the classroom or if there was no difference. The same question was repeated four months into the course in Questionnaire 2. In both cases students were asked to explain their answer. The most frequent reason given by those who answered 'more anxious' (Questionnaire 1 = 23.9%; Questionnaire 2 = 21.3%) was lack of instant feedback, with the attendant difficulty of assessing personal progress, particularly in comparison with other students, followed by isolation, speaking and pronunciation problems, and lack of confidence. The most frequently cited reason from the respondents who answered 'less anxious' (Questionnaire 1 = 36.6%; Questionnaire 2 = 27%) was the opportunity to work at their own pace, followed by absence of exposure to public criticism, lack of competition and peer pressure, and the chance to practise and make mistakes in private, to reflect and to try things out. An interesting finding here was the figure of 51.8% in Questionnaire 2 as opposed to 39.5% in Questionnaire 1 who found that the distance factor made no difference. It would appear that while the figure for 'more anxious' was roughly the same in both questionnaires, some of the students who had considered the distance factor made them less anxious at the start of their course were now not so sure and more of them felt there was 'no difference'. More research would need to be undertaken to investigate more closely the reasons for this change, for example whether this finding was indicative of general language anxiety prevalent in all learning environments, or related to something specific to learning in a distance mode.

Questionnaire 2 asked students to volunteer any types of tasks, activities or aspects of the course that made them feel particularly anxious, and over two-thirds of the sample (97), chose to answer. Nearly half of these students reported anxiety related to aspects of oral production: that is, recording assessed oral presentations and speaking in front of others, either during tutorials or during the examined group speaking test.

With regard to the second research question: 'What are the strategies that distance language learners deploy to cope with anxiety?' 37% of students who responded (n = 48) had some strategies to offer for dealing with language anxiety that they would recommend to other learners. These students were asked to look at a list of eleven strategies, tick any that applied to them, and then select the most important one. Table 2 shows all strategies selected in descending order, and Figure 2 shows the strategy considered to be the most important.

Table 2. All strategies used to deal with language anxiety

	Strategy (n = 48)	All %
2	Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to peak, even though I might make some mistakes	87.5
1	Use positive self-talk	64.6
3	Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly	35.4

	informal chat	
10	Use relaxation techniques	29.1
8	Share worries with other students	20.8
9	Let my tutor know I am anxious	20.8
5	Give myself a reward or treat when I do well	18.8
6	Be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning	16.7
4	Tell myself when I speak that it won't take long	14.6
11	Other	6.3
7	Write down my feelings in a day or notebook	2.08

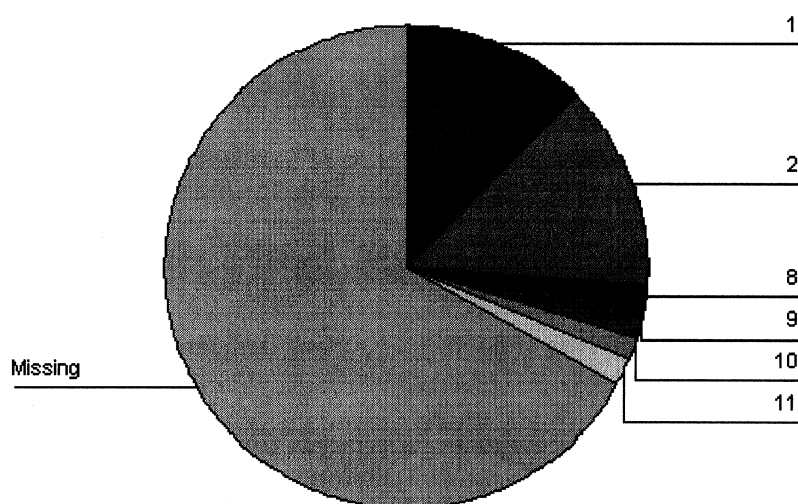


Figure 2. Most important strategy

1. = use positive self-talk (e.g. I can do it; it doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others make mistakes)
2. = actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes
3. = imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat **
4. = tell myself when I speak that it won't take long **
5. = give myself a reward or treat when I do well **
6. = be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning **
7. = write down my feelings in a day or notebook **
8. = share my worries with other students
9. = let my tutor know that I am anxious
10. = use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.
11. = other

As we can see, the most popular strategy, selected by 87.5% of the students who responded was: 'Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings

or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes'. This was also signalled as the 'most important'. 'Use positive self-talk', a well-known affective strategy, was second: 64.6% of the sample ticked it and over a third - 37.5% - identified it as the most important. Nearly a third of the sample - 29.1% - used relaxation techniques. With regard to getting support from others, 20.8% let their tutor know they were anxious, and the same percentage shared worries with other students. 6.3% had other strategies they used and the same percentage judged these to be more important than any of the suggested ones. Among them were ticking completed tasks, reviewing material already covered to see how you have progressed, revision and repetition to build confidence, joining a French self-help group, and, with some originality, gardening to clear confusion. It is important to note, however, that nearly two thirds of the sample (identified as 'missing' in the above pie chart) had not worked out any strategies for dealing with anxiety. Given that over a fifth of students at each intervention point (23.9%; 21.3%) declared themselves to be more anxious about learning a language at a distance than learning in a classroom, the number of those who had not found appropriate strategies is significant. These may be the students who could benefit in particular from guidance in developing good self-management skills, with the emphasis on affective strategies.

Study 2: Learner Self-Management

The second investigation is a small-scale longitudinal study and part of a larger comparative investigation into face-to-face and online tutorials focusing on beginners and examining issues such as learner-learner and learner-tutor interactions, individual difference, affective variables such as attitudes and anxiety, ICT literacy and familiarity, task design, achievement and learning strategies (see, for example, Duensing *et al.*, 2005 and Furnborough, 2005). In the first phase - in 2003, before the official start of their courses - volunteers (N=37) from both strands (face-to-face and online, German and Spanish) attended a day school where they worked collaboratively on tasks developed to enhance their self-knowledge. They were aware that the purpose of the day was to reflect on the process of language learning in various environments (face-to-face and online) and that they would engage in activities designed to help them become 'better' (online) learners which - in contrast to the embedded and indirect method to strategy development mentioned earlier - constituted a direct, interventionist and de-contextualised approach. The activities were based on Wenden's (1998) suggested procedures for the development of awareness raising activities for metacognitive knowledge acquisition and were tutor led. This approach also reflects the view of Nunan, Lai and Keobke (1999) that the sensitive tutor does not assume that learners are naturally endowed with the skills and knowledge they will need to identify what are, for them, optimal ways of learning a language. Moreover, Harris (2003) points out that the absence of tutor mediation to scaffold LSM can be problematic. Although she acknowledges that "the ultimate aim of LSM is to enable the learner to function independently", her findings indicate that "initial support and scaffolding from the teacher is [...] indispensable" (2003, p. 14).

Some materials, such as a quiz on modal preferences (visual, accoustic, etc.), were distributed to volunteers before the day school took place. Participants were asked to work through these prior to attending the event. At the end of the day school they completed a questionnaire. At the time of writing, this study is still in progress. In April 2004, at the midway point of the courses, 12 one-to-one semi-structured telephone interviews were completed based on the yoked subject procedure first used by White in her 1999 study where she asked learners to articulate their thoughts on how to represent self-instructed learning to someone planning to take the same course the following year. Further data will be gathered from semi-structured telephone interviews and another questionnaire which will be administered at the end of the courses. The aim of these questionnaires and interviews is to find out how far participants experience a long-term benefit from their increased awareness in terms of self and learning environment in their language studies with the Open University.

We report findings of the two questionnaires as related to the following research questions on self-management skills:

1. Can instructed self-management skills contribute to an increase in learners' self- and contextual knowledge?

2. Can instructed self-management skills help distance learners to deal with affective factors such as language anxiety in both face-to-face and virtual learning contexts?

Table 3 shows the students' responses in descending order. The paragraph following the table groups key issues into themes and discusses them briefly.

Table 3. Impact of activities for metacognitive knowledge acquisition on student self- and contextual knowledge

Self-knowledge / contextual knowledge (n=37)	All	%
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that being self-aware or reflective are important characteristics for language learning.	94	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the sessions has made them <i>more aware of the ways in which they approach language learning in general</i> .	86	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities made them <i>more aware of their modal preferences</i> and acknowledged the relevance of this awareness in terms of language learning in different environments (audio-graphic conferencing vs. face-to-face).	95	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities <i>raised their awareness in terms of the varying modal preferences of other learners</i> and their potential impact on successful learning outcomes in different language learning contexts.	95	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt <i>encouraged to reconsider their perceived weaknesses</i> .	84	
Participants found the tasks aimed at encouraging them to <i>reframe their perceived weaknesses</i> and at increasing their awareness of their limiting beliefs useful or very useful.	89	
Participants found the tasks designed to <i>increase the learners' awareness in terms of their resources and skills</i> useful or very useful.	88	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the day school <i>encouraged them to focus on their skills</i> .	95	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt <i>encouraged to transfer skills from other areas of life to language learning</i> .	78	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the sessions <i>encouraged them to be more flexible</i> .	84	
Students agreed or strongly agreed that – as a result of the sessions - they <i>felt more positive about their abilities to learn and speak a new language</i> .	75	

A multimodal learning environment

The majority of the participants (95%) agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities had made them more aware of their modal preferences (visual, acoustic, etc.) and thus their preferred mode when learning a language. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, p. 15) point us to the relevance of this kind of awareness explaining that "each meaning-making system – *mode* – provides different communicative potentials". One student, for example, acknowledged that he "had not previously given this much thought." The same number of participants also agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities had made them more aware of different modal preferences by different learners. This is particularly relevant with regard to online learning environments such as *Lyceum* where engagement with the learning process is likely to be easier for learners with an auditory preference. To a lesser

degree, such learning spaces also cater for visual learners, allowing them to use graphical objects such as pictures or text. A possible perceived drawback, however, is the lack of visual contact with peers and the tutor, and that it is not possible to learn (from) body language. Thus Lecourt (1999) found that communication in virtual learning spaces can be depersonalized and Kress & van Leeuwen (2001, p. 92) point to the fact that technological developments may "signify the most profound loss of embodiment we have seen yet".

Flexibility: learners and learning context

86% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities had made them more aware of the ways in which they approach language learning in general and 84% felt encouraged to be more flexible. Findings from previous studies in the Department of Languages (Hurd *et al.*, 2001) show that the flexibility offered by distance learning is mainly appreciated by students in terms of external circumstances insofar as it allows them to combine learning with other commitments. They do not necessarily associate flexibility with themselves as learners or in terms of the possibilities offered by the learning environment i.e. the possibility to choose certain modes to express one's meanings and thus to overcome constraints which might be anxiety provoking. This lack of flexibility has also been reported by White (1999). She found that in the early stages of her study "[...] fewer learners thought of self-instruction as offering flexibility in terms of [...] how to learn and so on." (White 1999, p. 449)

Perceived weaknesses and limiting beliefs

84% of those who responded agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the day school had encouraged them to reconsider their perceived weaknesses: "I am aware of my weaknesses and now think of them more positively, which is half way to overcoming them." 89% found the activities aimed at increasing their awareness of their limiting beliefs such as, for example, a strong focus on a perceived weakness, useful or very useful. This finding underpins the relevance of 'positive self-talk', a popular affective strategy which was also used by the learners in Study 1. One student who used to believe that she was a bad learner, not being able to remember details such as exceptions to grammar rules, etc. made the following comment on an activity on limiting beliefs: "Very useful – I keep saying to myself that I am good at overviews!" The activities designed to increase the learners' awareness of their resources and skills scored equally highly (88%). 78% felt encouraged to transfer skills from other areas of life to language learning, and one student commented: "This exercise is very helpful in building self-esteem!", an observation which confirms that self-confidence is a crucial affective learner variable.

Attitude and aptitude

75% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that – as a result of the day school – they felt more positive about their abilities to learn and to speak a new language, with two participants making the following observations:

"I now feel encouraged to approach the things I find difficult differently and with a far more positive attitude."

"You have shown us a useful strategy to overcome our inhibitions and doubts with regard to language learning."

At the mid-way point of their courses, 12 participants volunteered to take part in one-to-one telephone interviews. Half of them had taken part in face-to-face tutorials and the other half in online tuition via *Lyceum* on a regular basis. Table 4 shows answers provided by this focus group with regard to the two research questions:

Table 4. Impact of instructed self-management skills

Self-management (n=12)

All

Participants agreed or strongly agreed that <i>being self-aware or reflective are important characteristics for language learning.</i>	11
Participants agreed that <i>being able to assess one's own weaknesses and strengths is important for language learning.</i>	12
Participants agreed that <i>being able to manage one-self as a learner is important for language learning.</i>	12
Participants stated that <i>their self-awareness and their awareness of the learning environment had increased since they started the courses.</i>	8
Participants stated that <i>their attitude and approach to learning a language had changed since they started studying the Beginners' courses.</i>	8
Participants stated that <i>learning a language at a distance had caused them some anxiety at times.</i>	3
Participants stated that <i>taking part in the initial day school had enabled them to deal with language anxiety.</i>	6
Participants stated that <i>taking part in the initial day school had helped them to deal with their worries in general.</i>	4

All interviewees clearly recognise self-management as important in language learning. However, when invited to explain what exactly they consider self-management to be in the context of learning a language at a distance in different environments, few thought of factors other than time management. At the same time, their unanimous agreement on the ability to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses suggests some level of awareness of other important aspects of successful self-management and an autonomous approach to language learning in such contexts as illustrated by the following comments:

"Agree - I'm unwilling to stick my neck out and be laughed at, when I get it wrong, and I know that is a weakness in me, and I know that that is potentially stunting my development, so I would agree that it is important."

"Strongly agree - very important, because if you don't know what your weaknesses are, you can't build on them. And also if you know your strengths, you can build on those strengths, it might be things to do with how you learn things like visually or hearing, so it does give you the chance to build on things."

Some students also related self-management to establishing goals and to assessing their progress against those goals, or, as one learner put it:

"Management of the learning - knowing where you've actually got to get to, following through things that are interesting but at the same time being quite clear where you've got to get to."

Only three of the interviewees mentioned that learning a language at a distance had caused them some anxiety at times. The fact that 8 students stated the opposite indicates that taking part in the day school had a beneficial influence on their learning experiences – both online and face-to-face. 6 of those learners related the non-existence of anxieties specifically to their participation in the event:

"Anything that makes you more self aware and to try and understand what the worry is about- it helps you to kind of try and stand back and say, am I worrying about nothing? - I'm a great believer in reflection on anything that you're doing ...- I haven't thought about reflection in terms of language learning, but I've always seen reflection as being an important part of anything that one's doing."

4 interviewees found that the day school had helped them to deal with worries in general

terms:

"I was more relaxed after the workshop than I was before."

Discussion: Linking Anxiety and Self-Management

Both studies belong – to the authors' knowledge – to what seems to be a small number of investigations of language anxiety and learner self-management which take the 'self' and the learning context as a starting point for any considerations rather than the language learning task. However, the following limitations should be borne in mind in interpreting the results and drawing conclusions from these two studies:

- Firstly, the scale: 500 students were initially involved in Study 1, as opposed to 37 in Study 2. However, the 48 subjects in Study 1 who had used strategies for dealing with anxiety is a comparable figure to those subjects who underwent strategy instruction in Study 2.
- Secondly, Study 1 included a random sample, whereas the participants in Study 2 were self-selecting.
- Other potential limitations concern the level and language of students who participated: Study 1 involved lower-intermediate learners of French and Study 2 beginner learners in German and Spanish. However, so far no significant differences in findings can be attributed to language-specific factors.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the data offers a rich source of empirical evidence of the extent and nature of anxiety among distance language learners, the affective strategies that students use to minimize or combat anxiety, and the positive effect of systematic awareness-raising in terms of self and learning context in developing self-management skills. It also provides a solid foundation for further research in this area.

The results from Study 1 support the view that anxiety has a distinct role in FL learning at a distance. A significant majority of students found that there was something specific to language learning that caused anxiety, when compared to other subjects. Anxiety-related problems focused mainly on speaking, in particular when called on to speak in front of others, and fear of not being understood. There was more anxiety reported overall at the output stage, a finding confirmed by students who volunteered information on anxiety-provoking elements of the course materials. Paul (1990, p. 34) suggests when referring to independent learning in general that "while students with a lower self-esteem are those most likely to have difficulty with independent learning, they are also the group most apt to choose distance education courses (out of false impressions that they are less demanding than classroom-based ones)". While we cannot be sure that this holds true for language students, it nevertheless underlines the need for all distance learning students to have access to high quality levels of support. A major part of this is providing a framework which will enable learners to develop the skills and knowledge that "are considered to be central to self-management" (Rubin, 2001, p. 27).

Self-management is an essential strategy for language learners in general and for distance language learners in particular – in both face-to-face and virtual learning environments. Not only does it include self-knowledge and awareness and a reflective capacity, it also relates to the ability to set up optimal learning conditions in different learning contexts, including managing affective considerations such as anxiety and motivation. The relationship between a low 'affective filter' on one hand and improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation on the other as noted by Rubin and Thompson (1994) is important in terms of strategies that can influence language learning in positive ways. The use of affective strategies as part of self-management has a direct and positive influence on language learning and reflects the link between high levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation and a low 'affective filter' (Rubin and Thompson, 1994).

Raising awareness of personal resources and skills can have a significant effect on self-efficacy

beliefs, i.e. whether students believe they are able to mobilize and manage the resources they need to learn and will be able to sustain the effort (Cotterall, 1995). Moreover, Zimmermann and Bandura (1994) found that learners' self-efficacy and achievement beliefs are interrelated. In other words, the stronger the learners' self-efficacy beliefs, the more challenging their choice of learning goals, and the more intense their search to overcome obstacles encountered in the process of learning. This seems to be particularly relevant to language learning in multimodal virtual contexts where obstacles can – at times – also be related to the technological demands of the environment.

The strategies employed by participants in Study 1 to manage their anxiety included getting together with other learners, perhaps reflecting a need for collaboration and a sense of community in order to combat isolation and worries about progress in relation to others. Anxiety levels are likely to be lowered if students can learn in a non-threatening environment which encourages them to try things out and have fun, which builds confidence and promotes respect for different learning styles, approaches and personality traits. With regard to online learning, Macdonald (2003, p. 378) cites the "interplay between competence and affective factors such as growing confidence, motivation and group dynamics" and "the importance of the affective aspects of collaborative working – group cohesion and the evolution of mutual trust". This view is also reflected in the following comments from two interviewees participating in Study 2:

"It helped reinforce my knowledge that I'm not the only one, and getting together with other people about to embark on the same thing sort of gives you a spirit that you're not on your own."

"It was nice to feel that there were real human beings there, doing the same thing. I keep on thinking back on that day and thinking there are other people who are in the same situation as me, it's a very strange experience really doing it online."

Virtual learning environments such as *Lyceum* are available on a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week basis and thus provide an ideal forum for students – distance language learners in particular – to meet and work together and to reflect on their learning, and thus gradually to overcome their inhibitions. Moreover, the preliminary results from Study 2 suggest that the aforementioned 'loss of embodiment' is – at times – perceived as an advantage as it allows learners to remain 'incognito' and to speak more freely.

Finally, the role of the tutor in providing good feedback as an integral part of learner support should also not be underestimated in terms of reducing anxiety and keeping motivation levels high. This came over strongly in Study 1 where the most frequent reason given by those who felt that learning a language at a distance was more anxiety provoking than learning in the classroom was lack of instant feedback from tutors and/or peers. Here, too, networked learning environments seem to offer an advantage since they provide more flexible opportunities to support distance language learners in raising their self-knowledge and awareness of the learning context and to scaffold learner self-management accordingly.

Conclusion

These studies have sought to contribute to the research into language anxiety, its effect on learners in a distance language learning setting and the role of learner self-management in both face-to-face and online tutorial contexts. An investigation of the elements of the learning process that cause anxiety among distance language learners and the strategies that distance language learners deploy to reduce prompted the second study. This explores the extent to which instructed self-management skills can contribute to an increase in learners' self- and contextual knowledge and whether they can help distance language learners in combating affective factors such as language anxiety in both face-to-face and virtual learning contexts. Early results suggest that they can, and that there is a strong link between cognitive and affective factors and self-esteem, with increased self-awareness having a positive influence on other affective factors such as learners' self-efficacy and achievement beliefs.

The findings from the second study reported in this article indicate that – at least for beginners – direct, interventionist and de-contextualised methods are most apt to systematically foster learner reflection and to enhance learner self-management. They also seem to confirm Skehan's (1989) proposition that metacognitive strategies such as self-management can be expected to transfer more readily than cognitive strategies. This leads Hurd *et al.* (2001, p. 347) to draw the conclusion that "developing the knowledge and skills that make up strategic competence, particularly use of meta-cognitive strategies, is more likely to come about through de-contextualized methods." Contextualised training, on the other hand, allows learners to "develop their learning strategy repertoires while learning the target language at the same time" (Cohen, 1998, p. 80). Thus the potential benefits of a direct, interventionist, de-contextualised approach which gradually moves along the de-contextualised-contextualised continuum as learners' linguistic competence increases need to be looked at more closely. This approach would eventually allow reflection on learner role and learning context in the language learning process to be carried out in the target language.

Further research would also address the role of self-management skills in enabling learners to deal successfully with so called 'metacognitive experiences', i.e. "points when learners are confused, or uncertain, or when there is a breakdown in learning" (White, 2003, p. 140) which are likely to evoke language anxieties. White's studies indicate that such experiences are a "significant point of growth" for distance language learners and that they are "not confined to specific learning difficulties, but [...] strongly directed towards a concern about how best to manage their learning within a new context" (White, 2003, p. 143). In multimodal virtual learning spaces such as audio-graphic conferencing, confusion and uncertainty can at times be caused by the context itself, namely the variety and simultaneity of modes available to make meaning and the additional technological challenges they raise. This extra dimension to LSM calls for a more detailed exploration of the metacognitive experiences of distance language learners and the role they could play in reflective online interaction.

¹ These are students in their second year of learning a language (i.e. GCSE-level in the UK).

* This item does not appear in the bar chart, indicating that although students considered it as one of the contributory factors to anxiety, no respondent considered it as the most important.

** This strategy does not appear in the pie chart, indicating that although it was selected by some respondents as one of the strategies they used, no respondent considered it be the most important strategy.

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PUBLICATION TEN

Hurd, S. (2006c) Towards a better understanding of the dynamic role of the distance language learner: learner perceptions of personality, motivation, roles and approaches.

Distance Education 27 (3), 299-325. ISSN 0158-7919.

Towards a Better Understanding of the Dynamic Role of the Distance Language Learner: Learner perceptions of personality, motivation, roles, and approaches

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This study investigated the experience of learners enrolled on an Open University (UK) French course, and included personality factors, motivation, and tutor and student roles. The data gathered via multiple elicitation methods gave useful insights into issues of special relevance to distance language education, in particular the lack of fit between an inherently social discipline such as language learning and the distance context, whose main characterizing feature is remoteness from others. Motivation was seen to play a crucial role in success, along with tutor feedback, and personal responsibility for learning. Increased confidence and self-regulation were beneficial outcomes of the process of learning at a distance, and numerous suggestions for learning approaches based on personal experience were offered for language learners new to distance learning. The study concluded that the task for distance practitioners is to build on the insights shown by learners themselves, in order to target support where it is most needed.

Introduction

While distance education in general has attracted a great deal of research over many years (Gibson, 1998; Holmberg, 1986; Keegan, 1990; Lockwood, 1998; Moore, 1977; White, 2005), investigation into the distance learning of languages has really only taken off in the last decade. This could be attributed to the fact that languages were slow to join other subjects provided in distance settings. The Open University (UK), for example, did not present its first language course until 1995, some 25

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years after it opened its doors to learners of other subjects. The recognition that languages are considered more difficult to learn in distance mode than other subjects (Sussex, 1991) and that distance language learners require a greater degree of self-regulation than learners of other subjects (White, 1994) contributed to a cautious approach. It is also true that learning in distance mode has always been seen as problematic for the acquisition, practice, and assessment of foreign language speaking skills, given the physical absence of a teacher, the isolated context, and reduced opportunities for interacting in the target language.

Studies with distance language learners to date have investigated factors such as beliefs and expectations, learner support, feedback, critical reflection, autonomy, and learning strategies (Harris, 2003; Hurd, 2000, 2003, 2005; Hurd, Beaven, & Ortega, 2001; Murphy, 2005; Ros i Solé & Truman, 2005; White, 1995, 1999). Virtual learning environments and technology-mediated language learning are increasingly the subject of more recent studies (Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Shield, 2002). However, variables such as personality and affect, and their link with other variables have received less attention. It is now generally acknowledged that affective factors, in particular motivation, are critical to effective learning and often convincing predictors of language success or failure (Dörnyei, 2001a; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Ushioda, 1996). In relation to the distance language context, Hurd (2005, p. 9) argues that the “perceived inadequacy of feedback, frustration at unresolved problems, and lack of opportunities to practise with others and share experiences can have an adverse effect on motivation levels.”

Theoretical Background

Theories and models of personality and motivation in language learning, and the ways in which they relate to and influence each other, have been discussed in the literature for some years. The interrelationships of personality and L2 learning have attracted a particular focus from researchers (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Lalonde & Gardner, 1984; Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002). According to Dörnyei (2005, p. 29), personality factors are “heavily implicated in the learning process in general and in SLA in particular.” They are generally seen to act as “powerful modifying variables” (p. 24) which “shape the way people respond to their learning environment” (p. 30). Motivation is regarded as subject to variation depending on situational and other factors. Gardner’s (1985) socio-educational model of language learning distinguishes between integrative motivation (wishing to integrate into the target culture) and instrumental motivation (desiring academic or work-related advancement), largely mirrored in Deci and Ryan’s (1985) model of intrinsic (coming from within the individual) and extrinsic (coming from outside the individual) motivation. Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford (2003, p. 320) suggest that “a student’s total motivation is most frequently a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation” and that it “depends greatly on the context, people involved, and specific circumstances.” The link with other factors reflects the process model of motivation that has emerged more recently (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 66), where motivation is seen as a “dynamic, ever-

changing process” in constant flux as it interrelates with other variables, such as personality, beliefs, attitudes, and learning setting, and that these interrelationships are crucial to an understanding of the individual language learner experience. Dörnyei (2005, p. 118) maintains that this paradigm shift, characterized by an emphasis on process, on the “doing-side of personality,” has resulted in “an increased convergence of the concepts of personality and motivation, as both are now seen as antecedents of behaviour.”

The relationship between motivation, learner autonomy, and success is also largely acknowledged by researchers in the field (Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Dickinson, 1995; Dörnyei, 2001b; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Ushioda, 1996; White, 1999, 2003). Ushioda (1996, p. 10) postulates that “motivation is now implicated in a dynamic relationship with learning experience and success” and that “autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners” (p. 12). In the case of the distance learner, motivation is directly implicated, given the demands of the distance setting and the need to persevere, sometimes against overwhelming odds. Both the distance tutor and learner are engaged in a dynamic relationship at a distance; as the locus of control moves from one to the other, students increase their metacognitive awareness and skills, perceptions and behaviours evolve and change.

The Study

This longitudinal study was part of a wider project investigating affective factors in the distance language setting and had four intervention points. Its aims were three-fold: to investigate learner perceptions of a variety of interrelated factors in the distance language learning context, including personality factors, motivation, and tutor and student roles; to ascertain any perceived beneficial changes in learning approach as the course progressed; to draw preliminary conclusions from the findings for distance language practitioners. The research questions were as follows:

- Which personality traits do students consider an advantage when learning another language at a distance?
- What are distance language learners’ perceptions of the role of motivation in distance language learning?
- What are distance language learners’ perceptions of the tutor’s role and their own roles in the distance learning process?
- According to learners, does the process of distance language learning lead to better learning and if so, in what ways?

Participants

The study involved 500 Open University (UK) students enrolled on the lower intermediate French course L120 *Ouverture*. The course runs from February to October and learners are provided with three course books, each with related audio-visual material. The course books contain study charts, activities with answer keys

(Corrigés), grammar explanations, learning strategies, and study skills sections. Transcripts and a course and study guide make up the package. Each student is assigned a tutor in her/his region who holds tutorials (18 hours overall) at regular intervals throughout the course and the occasional day school. Neither is compulsory.

The sample for this study was drawn from all regions of the UK. Just over half the students fell into the 40–49 and 50–59 age groups; 71% were female; 42.5% had a degree or professional equivalent and 13.3% had some post-school qualification; 24.9% had either basic or advanced school qualifications, while 1.4% had no formal qualifications; the remaining 17.9% declined to give any information. The majority of students (85.9%) cited “for pleasure/interest” as one of their reasons for learning French and over one-fifth regarded it as their main motivation; 42.2% wanted to gain credits towards a qualification; but only 8.8% considered this to be the most important reason for study. Other reasons high on the agenda were love of France, being able to communicate with French speaking friends, and the desire to speak another language. Their motivations, therefore, were largely intrinsic.

Procedure and Methods

An initial pilot study was carried out in 2002 with 100 students of French studying L120 *Ouverture*, randomly selected by the Open University’s Institute of Educational Technology (IET). Research methods included two questionnaires and a set of end-of-course interviews. Following an analysis of the pilot, the research questions and instruments were refined and adapted for use in the main study, which was conducted with a new cohort of students studying the same course the following year.

The main study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the language learner experience at a distance. Data collection methods were chosen according to their suitability for the distance learning context and for their ability to provide multiple insights. They included two questionnaires containing a variety of question types and sections for open-ended answers, audio-recorded think aloud verbal protocols, and one-to-one telephone interviews. The Open University’s (UK) IET was called upon again to select a much larger sample consisting of 500 students from the 1021 enrolled on L120 *Ouverture*. The first questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was dispatched in February at the start of their course, and the 277 students who responded were sent a further questionnaire (see Appendix 2) four months later, i.e. in June, half-way through their course, to which 145 responded. Four volunteer students carried out the audio-recorded think aloud verbal protocols in July, and 15 took part in the one-to-one semi-structured telephone interviews in December, after the end of the course.

The quantitative data from both questionnaires were analysed using SPSS statistical software, backed up where appropriate by qualitative data from open-ended questions, the think aloud protocols, and the interviews. Most questions which required students to select from a range of options also contained an “other—please

give details” option to allow for personal responses in addition to those provided in the list.

Findings

Personality Factors Considered an Advantage in Distance Language Learning

Personality factors were examined in both February and June. Students were asked first to tick from a list all the traits that they felt might be an advantage in distance language learning and then, in a separate column, the three traits that they considered most important. Given the maturity of the participants and their relatively high level of education, interpreting these traits was not considered to be problematic. The results for all traits are shown in rank order in Table 1.

Being motivated attracted the highest results overall by a large percentage in both questionnaires; “persistent” and “enthusiastic” also attracted very high scores. Moreover, these traits were also considered to be the three most important in both February and June. The rank order for the overall results was very similar at both intervention points, with the main changes affecting “independent-minded” and “reflective,” which both rose two places in June, and “relaxed,” which fell three places.

Students were then asked to repeat this exercise, but this time selecting all the traits that described themselves as distance language learners, and then selecting the

Table 1. Personality traits considered to be an advantage for all distance language learners

	February		June	
	Per cent	Rank	Per cent	Rank
Motivated	89.9	1	93.8	1
Enthusiastic	84.5	2	81.4	3
Persistent	81.9	3	88.3	2
Systematic	75.8	4	73.1	4
Self-confident	67.9	5	64.8	5
Communicative	67.1	6	59.3	6
Willing to take risks	57.4	7	55.9	7
Patient	55.2	8	53.1	8
Imaginative	46.6	9	50.3	9
Relaxed	45.5	10	39.3	13
Optimistic	44.8	11	41.4	11
Independent minded	44.4	12	44.8	10
Reflective	29.2	13	41.4	11
Extrovert	28.5	14	25.5	14
Perfectionist	17.0	15	9.7	15
Introvert	6.1	16	4.8	16
Other	2.2	17	1.4	17

three traits they felt best described them. The results for all traits are presented in Table 2.

Being motivated, persistent, and enthusiastic were again selected by the majority, both overall and for the three most important traits. The higher figure for "persistent" in June suggests that after four months of study students were realizing just how much staying power was needed for distance language learning. Participants in June were also more willing to take risks and were more reflective, both important attributes of the distance language learner. These contrasted with lower figures for "communicative," "optimistic," "relaxed," and "self-confident," which suggest that a significant number of students were still in need of support to raise their confidence levels, to make them feel more positive and extend their risk-taking to the oral domain. Additional personality traits suggested by a small percentage of students under "other" were being "goal-oriented," "not easily discouraged," "pragmatic," "willing to try anything," and "having a good sense of humour."

Table 2. Personality traits selected by participants to describe themselves as distance language learners (%)

	February		June	
	Per cent	Rank	Per cent	Rank
Motivated	83.8	1	72.4	1
Enthusiastic	74.0	2	63.4	3
Persistent	61.0	3	66.9	2
Communicative	53.4	4	42.1	9
Independent minded	51.6	5	59.3	4
Systematic	50.2	6	45.5	7
Optimistic	49.8	7	39.3	10
Willing to take risks	46.6	8	48.3	5
Imaginative	42.6	9	45.5	7
Patient	39.7	10	36.6	11
Self-confident	39.7	10	33.8	13
Relaxed	37.5	12	36.6	11
Reflective	37.2	13	46.9	6
Perfectionist	30.3	14	29.7	14
Extrovert	22.0	15	16.6	16
Introvert	20.2	16	25.5	15
Other	2.5	17	1.4	17

The Role of Motivation

Motivation was clearly signalled as the most important factor in distance language learning by an overwhelming majority of students. To ascertain the relative ease or difficulty of maintaining motivation at a distance at the start of the course and after four months of study, the following question was asked:

1. Do you think it is (February)/Are you finding it (June) easier or more difficult to maintain motivation learning at a distance rather than in the classroom?

The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

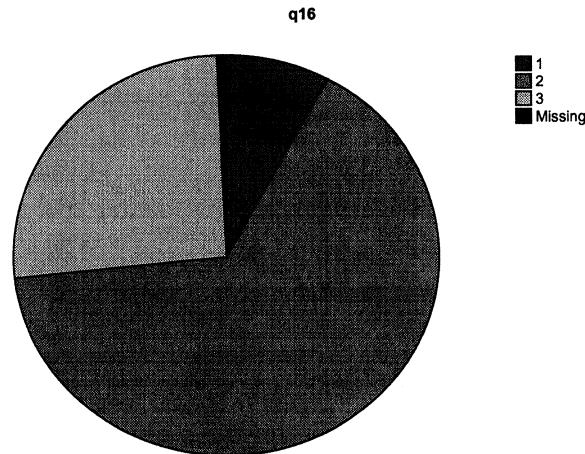


Figure 1. Maintaining motivation (February). 1, easier (7.9%); 2, more difficult (65.3%); 3, no difference (26.0%); 4, missing (0.7%)

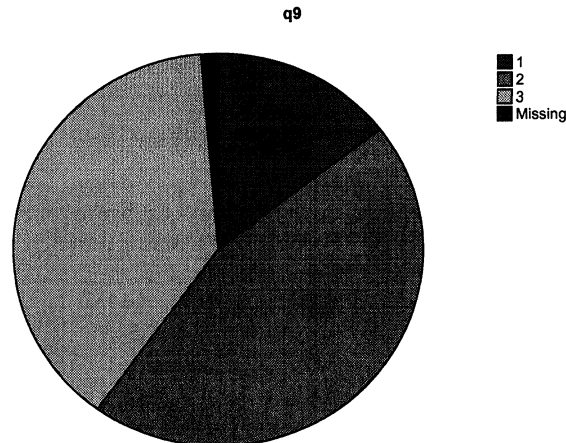


Figure 2. Maintaining motivation (June). 1, easier (14.5%); 2, more difficult (45.5%); 3, no difference (38.6%); 4, missing (1.4%)

Only 7.9% of the students at the start of the course in February had anticipated finding motivation easier to maintain at a distance, which rose to 14.5% in June, with over one-third claiming there was no difference. These figures could be explained by the fact that those who completed both questionnaires might have been more motivated students anyway. More important, however, is that halfway through

the course nearly half of them were still finding it more difficult to maintain motivation at a distance than in the classroom.

The one-to-one interviews conducted after the course ended provided a set of qualitative findings based on the full eight months of study, which served to triangulate the predominantly quantitative data from the questionnaires. Eight of the 15 students interviewed claimed that it was more difficult to stay motivated at a distance, citing reasons such as getting side-tracked and finding other priorities, the pressure to sort out your own problems, lack of continuity in study, and insufficient conversational practice. Four felt it was easier or the same, because of prior experience of distance learning, more maturity as an adult learner, or, from a more negative perspective, pressure of assessment. One comment raised an unexpected comparison with face-to-face learning:

It's got to be easier because there's none of the things that might worry you with face-to-face. Face-to-face means you get things coming at you in situations that you can't always get back straight away and that can be upsetting for some people. You probably feel that you're not terribly bright—it spells out your weakness in a way.

Comments from students taking part in the think aloud protocols added further qualitative data and reflected a degree of frustration, particularly with essay writing:

Oh well, this is a very slow process this essay writing, because not only do I have to think what I want to say, and then I have to think how I want to say it in French. In a way I try to avoid saying it... I don't want to write it in English and then translate it, but it's very difficult to know the approach. Or I get to the point where I think: Oh I won't bother. Or I just end up writing the same sentences in there and just changing a few words here and there. I dunno.

Two valuable comments from the think aloud protocols concerned the process of distance learning, which implied motivation or demotivation:

That's one advantage of remote teaching and remote studying... no-one knows what you actually put, not even your tutor... I can practise, I can write rubbish and I know no one is gonna mark it. This is part of the problem of working remotely: by the time I see anybody I'll have forgotten it (what I needed to know).

The second questionnaire contained five additional questions on motivation to further probe its link with distance language learning after 4 months of study. The first two questions were as follows:

1. If you are managing to stay motivated, to what would you attribute this?
2. If you are *not* managing to stay motivated to what would you attribute this?

In each case a list was provided for students to select one option, including "other—something or someone else (please give details)." Two additional options were given in the second question: "the assessment content" and "the assessment deadlines." The percentage results for the first ($N = 111$) and second ($N = 82$) questions are shown in Figure 3.

The materials were considered as the most significant factor in maintaining motivation levels, but were also implicated, by nearly a quarter of students, in depressed

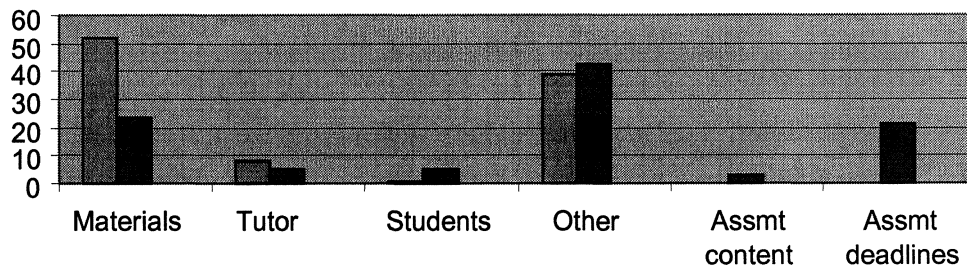


Figure 3. Elements influencing motivation (June). Column 1 (positive influence); column 2 (negative influence)

motivation levels. The 38.7% whose motivation was attributed to “something or someone else” cited: the desire to complete (“I’ve started, so I’ll finish!”); having done well in assignments so far and seeing progress; planning to live in France; imagining the end result; a combination of the materials, the tutor’s encouragement, and determination; and for some, financial considerations.

The 42.1% who attributed lack of motivation to “something or someone else” cited: lack of time; finding it difficult to fit coursework in around other commitments; the mixed media aspect of the course; other distractions; the lack of interaction with other students; lack of space to shut oneself off to study. Others laid the blame on themselves exclusively: “myself”; “my own fault”; “my personality and home circumstances.” Over one fifth were demotivated by assessment deadlines.

The remaining three questions concerned fluctuation of motivation levels, wanting to give up, and personal ways of keeping motivated. Over half of the students admitted to fluctuation in motivation levels, and around one-quarter to wanting to give up the course at some point. Seventy-six students (52.4%) had developed ways of keeping themselves motivated, as shown in Figure 4 (frequency indicates number of students, $N = 76$).

The most important strategy was positive self-talk, followed by setting goals, and keeping in touch with French native speaker friends. While opportunities to speak French kept many students motivated, reading was also popular, but watching French films and listening to or singing French songs were, perhaps surprisingly, not selected by anyone as the most important way of staying motivated. The six students who had “other” ways suggested: remembering the main reasons for taking L120 *Ouverture*; trying to stay in touch with fellow students; using a rewards system; and French conversation classes for extra practice.

Tutor Roles

Given the importance attached to the teacher as a critical factor in successful learning (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; White, 2003), students were asked in the initial questionnaire in February, at the start of the course, to give their view of the tutor’s

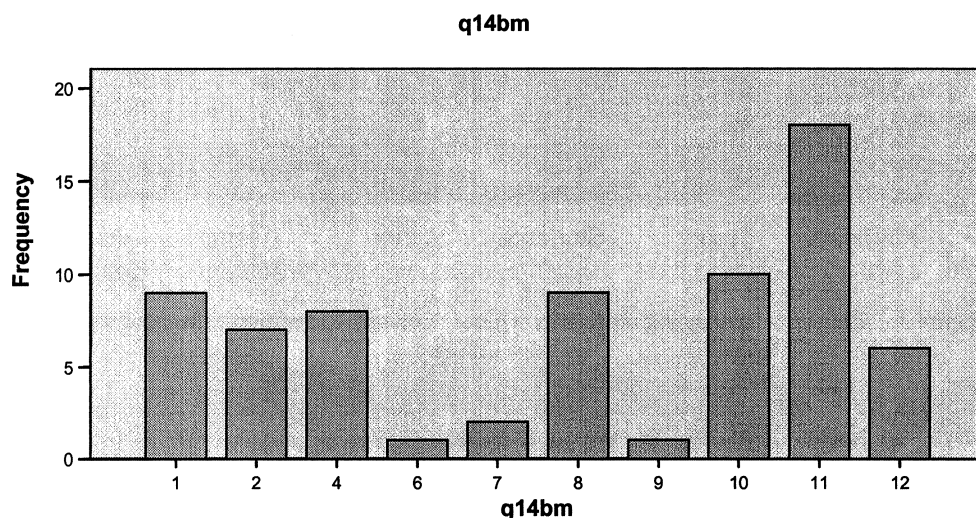


Figure 4. Ways to stay motivated (June). 1, keeping in touch with French native speaker friends (12.7%); 2, listening to French news on the radio or watching it on the TV (9.9%); 3, watching French films (0%); 4, reading French newspaper articles, extracts from novels, poems, etc. (11.3%); 5, listening to or singing French songs (0%); 6, talking in French to friends (1.4%); 7, talking in French to relatives, including children or grandchildren (2.8%); 8, visiting France as much as possible (12.7%); 9, keeping up to date with what's going on in France and the French speaking world (1.4%); 10, setting goals and keeping them under review (14.1%); 11, positive self-talk (25.4%); 12, other (8.5%)

role in distance language learning by choosing and ranking three roles from a list. The same question was repeated in June, but with additional items, and the students were asked to select only one as the most important role. The results for June are shown in Table 3.

"Provide feedback" was selected by the highest percentage on both occasions. "monitor and assess my learning progress," and "identify my problems as a learner" were high on the list of important roles in February, but less so in June, when "keep me motivated" and "correct my mistakes" were considered more important. Clearly, direct comparisons cannot be made between the February and June results as there were three additional questions in June. These results do, however, give an indication of students' thinking on this topic and an idea of how this might have changed over the four months of study.

Student Roles

The need for distance learners to "regulate and oversee the rate and direction of their learning to a far greater degree than classroom learners" (White, 1994, p. 12–13), implies a change in the balance of traditional responsibilities and roles. How learners in this study saw their own role in the learning process was examined using

Table 3. Tutor roles (June)

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid per cent	Cumulative per cent
Valid	1	19	13.1	13.4	13.4
	2	1	.7	.7	14.1
	4	22	15.2	15.5	29.6
	5	12	8.3	8.5	38.0
	6	41	28.3	28.9	66.9
	7	11	7.6	7.7	74.6
	8	11	7.6	7.7	82.4
	9	11	7.6	7.7	90.1
	10	14	9.7	9.9	100.0
	Total	142	97.9	100.0	
Missing	System	3	2.1		
Total		145	100.0		

1, provide good models of speaking and writing in French (13.4%); 2, tell me how long I should spend on activities (0.7%); 3, set my learning goals (0%); 4, create opportunities for me to practise (15.5%); 5, correct my mistakes (8.5%); 6, provide feedback (28.9%); 7, monitor and assess my learning progress (7.7%); 8, identify my problems as a learner and correct them (7.7%); 9, help me to become a better language learner (7.7%); 10, keep me motivated (9.9%); 11, other (please give details) (0%).

a similar approach to that used to investigate tutor roles. Students were asked in both questionnaires to select the roles which, in their view, were the responsibility of the learner. The roles that attracted the highest numbers overall were the same in both questionnaires, but with higher percentages in June and prioritized slightly differently, as shown in Table 4. Although "ask for help when needed" was considered quite an important student role in February, it slipped to eleventh place in June, ranked several places lower than "using French as often as possible" and "working hard and systematically."

Students were then asked to select the three roles they considered most important in February and the one they considered most important in June. Figure 5 gives the results for June (frequency indicates number of students, $N = 141$).

What came through strongly from the results at both intervention points was the importance students gave to being responsible for their own learning. In June over one-quarter chose it as the most important role, while in February nearly half chose it as one of the three most important. Other items that were also ranked highly on each occasion were "work hard and systematically," "use French as often as possible," and "do tutor marked assignments (TMAs) with care and hand them in on time." It would seem that even at the start of their course many students had a good degree of awareness of learner roles in distance language learning. It was equally important that they develop the skills of self-management implied by these roles. Later questions were designed to investigate the extent to which this was the case.

Table 4. Student roles

Student role	Quest 1 (February)		Quest 2 (June)	
	Per cent	Rank	Per cent	Rank
Do tutor marked assignments (TMAs) with care and hand them in on time	92.1	1	92.4	3
Act on tutor feedback	89.9	2	90.3	4
Be responsible for my own learning	88.8	3	93.1	1
Keep going even if I make mistakes	88.1	4	93.1	1
Ask for help when needed	87.0	5	75.9	11
Use French as often as possible	84.1	6	85.5	5
Turn up for exams	83.8	7	85.5	5
Seek out opportunities to speak French	61.6	8	80.0	8
Work hard and systematically	78.7	9	82.1	7
Use my own initiative	78.3	10	79.3	9
Learn how to cope with speaking French in front of others	77.3	11	77.9	10
Plan my work	75.5	12	69.7	13
Make a full contribution in tutorials	72.2	13	73.8	12
Take time to reflect on how I might improve	71.8	14	67.6	14
Keep a check on my progress	68.6	15	66.2	16
Keep an open mind	65.3	16	67.6	14
Try out different strategies for successful language learning	59.9	17	55.9	17
Other (please give details)	1.8	18	1.4	18

Tutorial and Other Forms of "People" Support

With regard to tutorials, the majority of students did attend. Of those 118 students, 85.6% were finding the tutorial "very helpful" or "helpful" and only 6.8% were finding them "not very helpful" or "not at all helpful." Twenty-seven students gave their reasons for non-attendance, which included clashes with work/family/domestic commitments, distance from centre, cost of travel and transport difficulties, living abroad, being in prison, time constraints, ill health, and age.

The Open University (UK) actively promotes the setting up of self-help groups for mutual support among students. Participants were therefore asked in February whether they had joined or would like to join a self-help group. 49.5% answered "Yes." However, by June, when the question was repeated, only 6.5% had actually joined one. Reasons for not joining included not wishing to commit, being tied down, lack of anyone prepared to set it up, lack of time, geographical distance, and the impossibility of finding a time to suit everyone. Some cited lack of confidence, while age and disability also featured. Other forms of people support were friends and work colleagues who had some competence in French, neighbours with a degree in French and/or who taught French, and, above all, family members (partners, children, and parents).

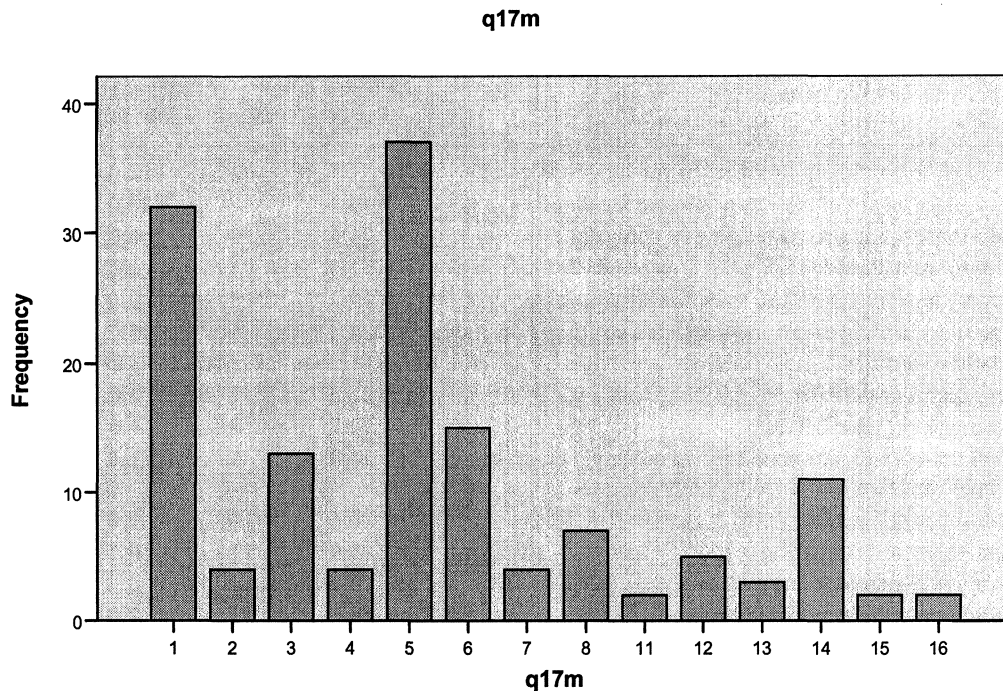


Figure 5. Most important student roles (June). 1, work hard and systematically (22.1%); 2, plan my work (2.8%); 3, do TMAs with care and hand them in on time (9.0%); 4, turn up for exams (2.8%); 5, be responsible for my own learning (25.5%); 6, use French as often as possible (10.3%); 7, seek out opportunities to speak French (2.8%); 8, learn how to cope with speaking French in front of others (4.8%); 9, make a full contribution in tutorials (0%); 10, keep a check on my progress (0%); 11, ask for help when needed (1.4%); 12, try out different strategies for successful language learning (3.4%); 13, keep an open mind (2.1%); 14, keep going even when I make mistakes (7.6%); 15, act on tutor feedback (1.4%); 16, take time to reflect on how I might improve (1.4%); 17, use my own initiative (0%); 18, other (please give details) (0%)

Becoming a Better Distance Language Learner

The study aimed to find out whether the process of learning a language at a distance was in any way influencing learning effectiveness. The following question was asked in June: Do you feel that through studying L120 *Ouverture* you are learning to develop better approaches to learning a language? One hundred and three students (71%) said that they were. This was probed further in a follow-up question: If "Yes", cross all the boxes that are relevant in column (a) and one box only in column (b) to indicate the way in which you feel you have improved most through studying the course so far. The results are shown in Table 5.

Increased confidence and greater awareness of strengths and weaknesses were signalled as the most significant changes by nearly two-thirds of the sample. Worrying less about making mistakes when speaking and greater willingness to participate in conversation were also in the top five for improved approaches to learning overall,

Table 5. Better approaches to learning (June)

	All		Most important	
	Per cent	Rank	Per cent	Rank
I feel more confident about using the language	51.7	1	42.0	1
I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses	45.4	2	20.0	2
I am more willing to participate in conversation	34.5	3	6.0	4
I am more willing to take risks	31.0	4	2.0	9
I worry less about making mistakes when speaking	29.7	5	9.0	3
I am more willing to try out suggested strategies for more effective learning	24.8	6	5.0	5
I am better organized	22.8	7	3.0	7
I manage my time better	20.7	8	4.0	6
I feel more confident about trying out my own strategies to help me learn better	20.0	9	3.0	7
I am more self-aware	16.6	10	2.0	9
I am better at prioritizing	15.9	11	0	13
I am less dependent on my tutor	13.8	12	0	13
I am more willing to ask for help	10.3	13	2.0	9
I manage my anxiety better	7.6	14	0	13
Other (please give details)	2.1	15	2.0	9

but selected as the most important by only a small percentage. These were positive results on the whole, although managing anxiety was very low down the list and not a single student chose it as the most important.

The 15 interviewees backed up some of the ideas above, including increased confidence and risk-taking, better organization and time management, and added some more of their own:

It certainly helped enthusiasm-wise.

I've certainly become more selective or clearer about what I think I want to do for myself and what I feel helps me.

I think perhaps being able to focus a bit better.

It made me a lot more courageous.

I basically learnt how to learn a language; that was one of the things I got out of it really—apart from the language itself. I actually learnt that you just have to give it a go really and usually it's not so bad.

A recognition that the style of learning appropriate for learning a language is not necessarily the same as the one used for other types of learning.

The final question in this section of the second questionnaire asked students to point to anything in particular which they felt had helped them to become a better distance language learner. The results based on the 120 students who answered were as follows, in rank order:

- being persistent and determined to succeed in the language goals I have set myself (34.2%);
- making more of an effort because I am learning a language for and by myself (30.8%);
- having to rely more on myself to improve my language proficiency (16.7%);
- having to develop skills to cope with fitting language learning around other commitments (10.8%);
- realising that I can make good decisions for myself about my language study (4.2%);
- needing to prove to others that I can be successful at languages (2.5%).

These results gave further evidence of increased self-reliance and growing autonomy among the majority of students. To ascertain further the degree to which students were becoming more self-aware and knowledgeable about effective learning approaches, the yoked subject procedure (White, 1994), in which students are asked to put themselves in the place of a new learner, was used for the final question: A friend of yours who has never learned a language at a distance before is intending to study L120 next year. What are the three main pieces of advice you could give to help him/her get the most out of the course?

The response was extremely high: 141 students (97.2%) offered their thoughts, and most gave three pieces of advice. The results are too extensive to reproduce in full; a selection of statements has therefore been drawn together under nine general headings:

Getting prepared. “Get up to scratch before you start and get used to listening to French.”

Self-knowledge. “Think carefully about what you want to learn and what you want to achieve.” “Ask what your motivation is: is it strong enough to carry you through the course when the going gets tough?”

Learning approaches. “Pace yourself and try to do little and often.” “Take risks in both TMAs and tutorials—better to try out a new phrase and have it corrected than repeat one you know is correct (or you will learn nothing).”

Making the most of support. “Make sure you attend tutorials for support from tutor and other students for listening and speaking practice, boosting confidence, for face-to-face practice and helpful pointers.”

Reassurance—dos and don’ts. “Be patient, it does take some time to accustom yourself back into learning.” “Don’t think you are the only one having difficulties keeping up to date, everyone else is behind. Remember—‘mid-course crisis’ (m.c.c.) is normal.”

Organization and time management. “Ensure you’re able to put aside time on a regular basis; cramming is ineffective in language learning.” “Make your own timetable that fits your lifestyle.”

Motivation. “Give yourself rewards for completing sections.” “Be positive and enjoy the course.”

Language practice opportunities. “Listen to the language at every opportunity—even if you don’t understand it all, the sound and rhythm of the language will be helpful.” Speak French as often as possible with other Francophiles; it helps to overcome nerves/embarrassment.”

Being realistic. “It’s more difficult than you think to get the studying done.” “Allow time for contingencies, holidays, etc.”

The same question was adapted for the interviews to take account of the fact that students had now completed the course. Comments largely reinforced those from the questionnaires and included staying positive and reflecting on just how much had been learned:

It is far too easy to focus upon what you can’t do.

Using the videos and CDs for—you’ve just got to be able to jump in with both feet and think well, sod the consequences, here goes.

Efficient use of time.

Effort.

Dogged perseverance—you just have to keep ploughing on somehow.

Being focused on what you are doing.

Persistence, patience, tenacity and determination—you do have to keep going over and over some things to get them into your head.

Having an open mind, being flexible and believing in yourself.

Discussion

The data gathered from this study using both quantitative and qualitative methods gave a comprehensive picture of language learning in a distance context from the perspective of the actual learner. Multiple elicitation methods used at different intervention points during the year helped to triangulate the data and increase the reliability of the responses.

The findings for being motivated, persistent, enthusiastic, and systematic as traits advantageous to distance language learners reflected good levels of self-awareness. Interestingly, the bottom three personality traits in both February and

June—"extrovert," "perfectionist," and "introvert"—did not correspond with findings from other studies with face-to-face learners, where extroversion, at least in terms of oral skills, is considered to be an advantage (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999).

The student perspective on motivation as the key factor in successful learning echoed the general consensus among researchers described earlier. Over half admitted to fluctuation in motivation levels, reflecting Garcia's (1999, p. 231) view that "one of the prime characteristics of motivation is that it ebbs and flows." The emergence of tutor feedback as considerably more important than any other tutor role was in line with White's (2003, p. 187) contention that "feedback plays a critical role for distance language learners, not only as a response to their performance, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement and motivation to continue."

In terms of their own roles as learners, the fact that four months into the course being responsible for their own learning was considered by over one-quarter of respondents to be the most important role that they should take on was evidence of greater self-regulation. This was further reinforced in the post-course interviews, where comments supported higher levels of metacognitive awareness as well as improved self-management. These results reflect those of other studies which noted evidence of metacognitive growth among advanced distance language learners (Hurd, 2000) and from "novice" self-instructed language learners (White, 1999).

Roughly three-quarters of respondents felt that they had improved their learning approaches through the process of learning a language at a distance. In some cases learners who were used to a highly dependent way of learning found themselves taking a fresh look at learning approaches, becoming more self-aware and acquiring new skills, for example in self-monitoring and reflection, planning and prioritizing, self-discipline and taking responsibility. These shifting perceptions and evolving approaches were evidence of "dynamic individuals within the distance learning experience" (White, 2005, p. 171) with clear insights into all the elements that make up the distance language process, including the roles of tutor and student.

Virtually all participants had some advice for new learners, ranging from the need for advanced preparation, both mental and practical, to adopting appropriate learning approaches, grabbing all practice opportunities, and making the most of support of all kinds. Students were very clear about the need to be organized and stick to a timetable, many of them having learned from their own failure to plan and be realistic from the start. In the affective domain there was much helpful advice on staying motivated and adopting a reflective attitude, recognizing that anxiety and panic were common and that you were not alone, and focusing on the enjoyment and fun of learning a language.

However, it is important to bear in mind that the demographic make-up of this random sample included 47% who had previously taken an Open University (UK) course and could therefore be considered to have a reasonable knowledge of the requirements of distance learning, although not necessarily in relation to the specific demands of language learning. The age range, around two-thirds over 40, could be an additional contributory factor to the relatively high levels of metacognitive awareness and skills that students demonstrated and developed as the course progressed.

These largely positive results should also not obscure the fact that although at the start of the course intrinsic motivation was the main driver for learning a language, nearly half the students in June were still finding it hard to maintain motivation levels. Moreover, 11.8% did not feel they were developing better approaches and the 17.2% who did not answer this question are likely to have also been among this group.

Given the importance of being and staying motivated when learning a language at a distance, a fruitful avenue for further research would be a more detailed exploration of the elements of motivation specific to distance language learning, in order to provide more targeted support to those who need it. The evidence of a correlation between motivation and achievement with face-to-face learners would also argue for the inclusion of achievement measures in future studies with distance language learners. Other future directions could involve follow-up in terms of individual case studies to correlate specific results by student and thus be able to track individual metacognitive and affective development throughout the course. As White (2005, p. 170) contends: "there is still much work to be done in terms of understanding attitudinal and affective orientations to the development of self-knowledge."

Conclusion

The outcomes of the study extend our knowledge of the roles and interrelationships of key variables in a discipline whose specific features mark it out as very different from other subjects taught at a distance, in particular the mismatch between the inherently social nature of languages and the essentially solo mode of learning. As such, it makes a valuable contribution to the distance education field. Useful insights were obtained from both the quantitative results and from individual student comments into the ways in which as distance language providers and teachers we could improve our support in the affective domain, given its potential to influence how efficiently students can use the skills and assets that they have (Ehrman, 1996).

As distance learning institutions reach out increasingly to the young and to under-represented sections of the community it becomes even more incumbent on distance practitioners to take steps to ensure that the needs of all learners in a rapidly changing learning environment are being met. White (2003, p. 118) rightly warns that "understanding the dynamics of distance learner characteristics has profound implications not only for the design of courses and learner support, but for the individual distance language teacher." The challenging task for all distance language practitioners is to engage not only in general debates around the distance learner, but to focus in particular on the elements specific to language learning, how these impact on the learner at a distance and how best they can be addressed. Listening attentively to learners is an important first step.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Monica Shelley for her invaluable help in commenting on the design of the questionnaires and analysing the questionnaire data.

Note on Contributor

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Appendix 1

Learning a language at a distance

L120 Questionnaire 1, February 2003 (questions relating to personality factors, motivation, tutor and student roles)

Personality factors

Listed below are a number of different personality traits which might be an advantage when learning a foreign language at a distance:

- i) In the first column please put a cross against all that you think apply to **all** distance language learners.
- ii) In the second column please put a cross against the three you think are the most important.
- iii) In the third column, please put a cross against **all** the personality traits that describe **you** as a distance language learner.
- iv) In the fourth column, put a cross against the three traits which you think describe **you** best.

	<i>All distance language learners</i>		<i>You as a distance language learner</i>	
	(i) All that apply	(ii) 3 most important	(iii) All that apply	(iv) 3 most important
Extrovert.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introvert.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Perfectionist.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Willing to take risks.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Imaginative.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Persistent.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relaxed.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reflective.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self-confident.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Motivated.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Optimistic.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Enthusiastic.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Systematic.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Independent-minded.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Patient.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communicative.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>(please give details)</i>				

Motivation

Do you think it is easier or more difficult to maintain motivation when you learn at a distance rather than in the classroom?

Easier.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
More difficult.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
No difference.....	<input type="checkbox"/>

At this stage, do you have any ideas about how to keep yourself motivated as you begin to study L120? Please list them here.

Tutor's role

What would you say is the tutor's role in distance language learning?

Rank the three most important to you by placing a:

1 in the box beside the most important

2 in the box beside the next most important

3 in the box beside the third most important

Provide good models of speaking and writing in French	<input type="checkbox"/>
Correct my mistakes.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Help me to become a better language learner.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provide feedback.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify my problems as a learner and correct them.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Monitor and assess my learning progress.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep me motivated.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please give details).....	<input type="checkbox"/>

Your role

What would you say is your role as a distance language learner?

Cross **all** that apply in column (a), and cross the **three** most important in column (b).

(a) (b) Most
All important
(cross
3 only)

Work hard and systematically.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Plan my work.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do TMAs with care and hand them in on time.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Turn up for exams.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Be responsible for my own learning.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use French as often as possible.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seek out opportunities to speak French.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learn how to cope with speaking French in front of others...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Make a full contribution in tutorials.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep a check on my progress.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ask for help when needed.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Try out different strategies for successful language learning.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep an open mind.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep going even when I make mistakes.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Act on tutor feedback.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Take time to reflect on how I might improve.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use my own initiative.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (<i>please give details</i>).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Have you been to a tutorial yet?

Yes No

☐
☐

If Yes, please say how helpful you found the tutorial

Very helpful	Helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful
-----------------	---------	-------------------------------------	---------------------	-----------------------

(Cross one box only).... ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

If you are not attending tutorials, please say why

Have you joined, or would you like to join a self-help group?

Yes No

☐
☐

Appendix 2

L120 Questionnaire 2, June 2003 (additional questions)

Motivation

If you are managing to stay motivated, to what would you attribute this?
(Please cross one box only)

The materials	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your tutor.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other students.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Something or someone else (please give details).....	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you are not managing to stay motivated, to what would you attribute this?
(Please cross one box only)

The materials	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your tutor.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other students.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
The assessment content.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
The assessment deadlines.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Something or someone else (please give details).....	<input type="checkbox"/>

Has your motivation fluctuated so far during the course?

Yes No

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

If **Yes**, please give details

Have you at any point wanted to give up studying L120 *Ouverture*?

Yes No

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

If **Yes**, please say why

Have you developed any particular ways to keep yourself motivated throughout your study of L120 *Ouverture*?

Yes No

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

If you answered **Yes**, to the previous questions please cross **all** that apply in column **(a)** and cross the **one** most important in column **(b)**.

	(a) All	(b) Most Important (cross one only)
Keeping in touch with French native-speaker friends.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening to French news on the radio or watching it on the TV.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watching French films.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading French—newspaper articles, extracts from novels, poems, etc.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening to or singing French songs.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Talking in French to friends.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Talking in French to relatives, including children or grandchildren.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visiting France as often as possible.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keeping up to date with what's going on in France and the French-speaking world.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Setting goals and keeping them under review.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Positive self-talk (e.g., some bits of the course are bound to be more difficult than others; I shall be so pleased if I stick it out/I shall be disappointed with myself if I give up now; I really enjoyed the video activities in Book 1 and there will be more of them, etc.).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (<i>please give details</i>).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Becoming a better distance language learner

Do you feel that through studying L120 *Ouverture* you are learning to develop better approaches to learning a language?

Yes No

☐
☐

If **Yes**, cross **all** the boxes that are relevant in column **(a)** and **one** box only in column **(b)** to indicate the way in which you feel you have improved most through studying the course so far.

	(a) All	b) Most important (cross one only)
I feel more confident about using the language.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am better at prioritising.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am better organised.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I manage my time better.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more self-aware.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am less dependent on my tutor.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more willing to participate in conversation.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I worry less about making mistakes when speaking.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more willing to take risks.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more willing to ask for help.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I manage my anxiety better.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more willing to try out suggested strategies for more effective learning.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel more confident about trying out my own strategies to help me learn better.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (<i>please give details</i>).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Can you point to anything in particular that you feel has helped you to become a better distance language learner? (*Please cross one box only.*)

Having to rely more on myself to improve my language proficiency.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Realising that I can make good decisions for myself about my language study.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making more of an effort because I am learning a language for and by myself.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Having to develop skills to cope with fitting language learning around other commitments.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Needing to prove to others that I can be successful at languages.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Being persistent and determined to succeed in the language goals I have set myself.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (<i>Please specify</i>).....	<input type="checkbox"/>

Getting help from other people

Have you joined a self-help group?

Yes No
☐ ☐

If **Yes**, in what way is it helpful to you as a distance language learner?

If **No**, is this because

You didn't feel it would be useful.....

There wasn't an established one in your area.....

You did not want to set one up yourself.....

Other *(please give details)*.....

Is there anybody else (family, friends, other students) from whom you have sought help? *(Please give details)*

A friend of yours who has never learned a language at a distance before is intending to study L120 next year. What are the three main pieces of advice you could give to help him/her get the most out of the course?

PUBLICATION ELEVEN

Hurd, S. (2007a) Anxiety and non-anxiety in a distance language learning environment: the distance factor as a modifying influence. *System* 35 (4), 487-508.

ISSN 0346-251X.



Anxiety and non-anxiety in a distance language learning environment: The distance factor as a modifying influence

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Received 11 January 2007; received in revised form 7 May 2007; accepted 24 May 2007

Abstract

Foreign language anxiety in classroom-based language learning has a long history of research, but there are fewer studies examining this particular phenomenon with respect to the distance language learner. The isolated context and the physical absence of tutor and peers suggest that FL anxiety might be intensified in a distance setting. A longitudinal study using questionnaires, think-aloud protocols and one-to-one telephone interviews with students enrolled on a distance lower-intermediate French course at The Open University (UK) set out to test this hypothesis and to explore the nature of language anxiety in a distance learning environment and the strategies students use to cope with it. The findings indicated that although there were areas in which distance language learners shared aspects of anxiety with face-to-face learners, the distance factor could be causally linked to some marked differences with regard to the nature and extent of language anxiety. Moreover, there was evidence that the distance language learning setting may be associated with absence of anxiety for some learners, a finding that merits further investigation.

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Keywords: Distance language learning; Affect; Language anxiety; Strategies

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doi:10.1016/j.system.2007.05.001

1. Introduction

Language anxiety ranks high among factors influencing language learning, whatever the learning setting (Oxford, 1999), and has become central to any examination of factors contributing to the learning process and learner achievement. Arnold and Brown (1999, p. 9) contend that anxiety is ‘quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process and that there are few, if any, disciplines in the curriculum which lay themselves open to anxiety production more than foreign or second language learning’.

In the distance learning context, affective problems may be intensified because of (1) the specific features of languages which make them more difficult to learn at a distance than other disciplines (Sussex, 1991), (2) the fact that language learning, an inherently *social* activity, sits awkwardly in a learning mode whose defining characteristic is *distance*, and (3) isolation and separation from tutor and peers, which militate against easy identification of learners who could benefit from guidance in affective control.

The study reported in this paper aimed to establish the elements of the distance language learning process that are associated with anxiety and non-anxiety and to explore the strategies distance language learners deploy to reduce their anxiety.

2. Literature review

The extensive body of research into language anxiety spans over three decades (Arnold, 1999; Brown, 1973; Ehrman, 1996; Gregersen, 2003, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kleinmann, 1977; Kondo and Ying-Ling, 2004; MacIntyre, 1999; Mills et al., 2006; Oxford, 1999; Spielmann and Radnofsky, 1999; Young, 1999). Learning a new language is said to be ‘a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition’ (Guiora, 1983, p. 8) and an ‘uncomfortable and unsettling experience’ (Horwitz, 2001, p. 121), implicating self-concept and self-expression to a degree not experienced in the study of other disciplines (Horwitz et al., 1991). The anxiety experienced by language learners is said to be unique to the language learning process and completely distinct from other forms of anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999). Studies point in particular to the way in which anxiety can inhibit successful language learning through its ‘subtle’ and ‘pervasive’ effect on cognitive processing (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994; Oxford, 1999) which can result in problems with learning, for example listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, and ultimately low achievement (Gardner et al., 1997).

Critics, most notably Sparks and Ganschow (1995, 2000), do not accept a causal relationship between anxiety and language learning, in other words that anxious learners make poor learners or that poor language learning can result from anxiety. They consider affective variables, in particular anxiety, to be ‘sealed off during cognitive processing’ (1995, p. 239), and devoid of any explanatory power. According to them, anxiety is more likely to be related to problems inherent in a particular task and to poor decoding skills in the learner. In other words, anxiety may *result* from poor language learning but does not *cause* it, and therefore cannot be used as a variable to explain differences in language learning ability.

The rejoinders to Sparks and Ganschow by MacIntyre (1995a,b; 1999); in the 1990s and, more recently, Horwitz (2000, 2001), seek to defend the importance of language

anxiety as a multifaceted variable that can be both a cause and a consequence of poor language learning. Horwitz (2000, p. 256) reminds us that ‘the potential of anxiety to interfere with learning and performance is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and education’ and ‘fundamental to our understanding of how learners approach language learning, their expectations for success or failure, and ultimately why they continue or discontinue study’ (2001, p. 121). In summary, Elkhafaifi (2005, p. 208) states that ‘the majority of studies support the view that anxiety contributes to poor performance, not the reverse’.

While there have been many studies investigating anxiety in the classroom (Cheng et al., 1999; Frantzen and Magnan, 2005; Rodriguez and Abreu, 2003; Saito et al., 1999), affect in the distance language learning context has received relatively scant attention (Bown, 2006; Harris, 1995), and yet it is possibly in this setting that affective problems are most acute. As White (2003, p. 114) states: ‘Further demands on the affective resources of both learners and teachers arise from the more isolated study context, separation from peers and the teacher, and reduced or altered forms of social contact and interaction’.

3. The study

The investigation of anxiety and non-anxiety reported in this paper was a major strand of a wide-ranging longitudinal study investigating affect in the distance language learning context. The findings from the whole study were too extensive to report in one paper. For this reason, results from the same study relating to motivation, roles, personality and approaches have been reported separately (Hurd, 2006).

In order to provide a context for anxiety in the distance language context and in line with Spielmann and Radnofsky (1999)’s contention that tension in language learning is linked to personal expectations and a priori beliefs about language, the first stage of inquiry aimed to gather data on students’ reasons for studying at a distance and their beliefs about learning a language in distance mode. The following research questions were addressed:

1. Why do learners study at a distance and what are their beliefs about distance language learning?
2. What elements of the distance language learning process are associated with anxiety and non-anxiety?
3. What strategies do distance language learners deploy to reduce anxiety?

3.1. Participants

The sample of 500 students following The Open University (UK)’s, lower-intermediate French course *Ouverture* represented around half the total number enrolled on the course, which runs from February to October each year. Table 1 gives details of the participants and numbers involved at each stage of the study.

The course materials consist of printed material – three course books, transcripts and a course and study guide – and related audio–visual material. Each student is assigned a personal tutor who marks their assignments and conducts face-to-face tutorials (18 h

Table 1
Participants

	Number of participants	Age range	Gender	Prior educational experience
		16–29 = 15%	71% female	Degree or professional equivalent = 42.5%
		30–49 = 46%		Post-school qualification = 13.3%;
		50+ = 39%		Basic or advanced school qualifications = 24.9%
				No formal qualifications = 1.4%
				No information = 17.9%
Original sample	500			
Questionnaire 1	277			
(February): returns				
Questionnaire 2	145			
(June): returns				
Think-alouds (July)	4			
Interviews (December)	15			

throughout the course)¹ and the occasional dayschool. These are optional, and many students, either through necessity or volition, have little or no contact with their peers or tutor.

3.2. Procedure and methods

The study used multiple elicitation methods administered at four intervention points to investigate anxiety (see Table 1):

- questionnaires (February and June) to contextualize the study by providing background information, and to indicate any global changes in perceptions as the course progressed;
- audio-recorded think-aloud protocols (July) to allow a better understanding of the processes involved as students worked through two designated course book tasks;
- one-to-one semi-structured telephone interviews (December) to provide a wider perspective on anxiety and strategy use after completion of the course.

Existing anxiety scales, including the most widely used FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) were examined, but not found to have enough relevance to a distance setting because of their emphasis on classroom-based learning and the anxiety associated with language classes and tests. The questionnaires were developed, therefore, to fit the specific aspects of distance language learning, including context, tutor and student roles, strategy use and learner support, and a pilot was carried out with 100 students. Following an analysis of the pilot, the research questions and instruments were refined and adapted for use in the main study which was conducted the following year with a new larger cohort of students studying the same course ($N = 500$). Questions that had not yielded much

¹ Tutorials have been offered online as an alternative to face-to-face since 2006, after this study was carried out.

information in the pilot or to which there had been large numbers of answers recorded as ‘missing’ in the statistical analysis were omitted in the main questionnaires. In other cases, findings from the pilot were incorporated into the questionnaires, or included in the form of examples to clarify the kind of information being sought, e.g. ‘Do you have any ideas for dealing with anxiety in learning a language at a distance?’ Previous *Ouverture* students came up with suggestions such as raising concerns with their tutor, and speaking where no-one can hear you – ‘in the car for instance’. MacIntyre and Gardner’s (1994) three-stage model of anxiety measure was incorporated into the second questionnaire with a few minor modifications to the processing and output scales: any references to the classroom situation or to tests were removed, as these were not relevant to the study.

The first questionnaire (see Appendix A) was dispatched in February at the start of the course, and the 277 who responded were sent a further questionnaire four months later, i.e. in June, halfway through their course (see Appendix B). The think-alouds (see Appendix C) were conducted in July as a small-scale pilot within the main study and have been reported in detail in a separate paper (Hurd, 2007). Four volunteer students registered on the course audio-recorded their thoughts as they worked through all stages of a reading and a writing activity from their course book. Fifteen students took part in the one-to-one telephone interviews in December (see Appendix D), after the end of the course. Students were given an undertaking that all written and recorded materials would remain confidential and would not be linked to personal details in any subsequent reports or publications.

4. Findings

The questionnaires provided mainly quantitative data which were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies), and indicated general trends in the cohorts at the start and mid-point of the course. Qualitative data gathered from responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaires, think-aloud verbal protocols and telephone interviews helped to triangulate the findings by complementing and giving depth to the quantitative results. The findings are presented in line with the research questions they set out to address.

4.1. *Learners’ reasons for studying at a distance and their beliefs about distance language learning*

The first questionnaire provided some general information about learners’ backgrounds, their reasons for choosing to learn in distance mode and their beliefs about learning. Students were asked to give all their reasons for learning at a distance and then to select the most important reason. The results are shown in Table 2 in rank order for ‘most important’ reason.

Practical reasons were the driver for nearly two thirds of all students (64.5%) whose main reasons for distance study included the need to fit their learning round work and family, lack of proximity to an educational institution or mobility problems. The remaining students (35.3%) appear to have been already well disposed towards learning at a distance from the outset and believed that it had major benefits. Their ‘most important’ reasons for studying at a distance included the chance to work at your own pace, the challenge, reduced stress, and preference for solo learning. Other reasons given were value for

Table 2
Reasons for learning a language at a distance

Reason	% All reasons	Rank	% Most important reason	Rank
Need to fit learning around work	56.0	1	39.3	1
Need to fit learning around family	48.7	2	20.6	2
Other	14.1	10	11.8	3
Can learn at my own pace	45.8	3	9.2	4
Interesting challenge	40.8	4	6.9	5
Live too far from an education institution	14.8	8	3.1	6
Less stressful than learning in a classroom	15.9	7	1.9	7
Classroom-based learning has never worked for me	8.3	12	1.9	7
Prefer to learn on my own	21.7	5	1.5	9
Can't get out of my home easily	9.4	11	1.5	9
Want to try something different	18.8	6	1.5	9
Learn better at a distance	14.4	9	0.8	12
Easier than learning with others	6.5	13	0	13

money, accessibility, flexibility, control over learning, and the quality of Open University materials.

Students were asked in both questionnaires about anticipated or actual problems with learning a language at a distance. Over two thirds anticipated problems at the start of the course in February, a figure that rose to over three quarters in June, with the gap widening further between those who were actually experiencing problems after four months of study and those who were not, as shown in Table 3.

The problems considered more serious after four months of study were (1) language acquisition factors: developing fluency, having enough practice and finding opportunities to talk to others, (2) metacognitive factors: prioritising, assessing strengths and weaknesses and measuring progress, and (3) affective factors: worrying about failure and feeling isolated. As this study was concerned with anxiety, the affective aspects were examined in more detail, firstly in the questionnaires, and then in the think-alouds and interviews.

4.2. *Elements of the distance language learning process that are associated with anxiety*

Students were asked in February and June whether they felt more or less anxious learning a language at a distance than in a classroom, or if there was no difference (see Table 4).

The results were interesting in that percentages for June were slightly lower for both more and less anxious, and considerably higher for 'no difference'. A breakdown of results from students who replied to both questionnaires showed that 55.4% held the same view at both intervention points. However, four months into the course, the remaining 44.6% had changed their minds: while 27.4% now felt there was no difference, 10.8% felt more anxious, and 6.4% less anxious. Although the direction of change was mainly towards 'no

Table 3
Anticipated problems (February) and actual problems (June) with learning a language at a distance

	% Questionnaire 1 (February)	% Questionnaire 2 (June)
Yes	68.4	76.1
No	31.6	23.9

Table 4
Anxiety and distance language learning

	% Questionnaire 1 (February)	% Questionnaire 2 (June)
More anxious	23.9	21.3
Less anxious	36.6	27
No difference	39.5	51.7

Table 5
Changes in view of anxiety and distance language learning

	% Questionnaire 2 (June)
No change	55.4
Less anxious to more anxious	3.6
No difference to more anxious	7.2
No difference to less anxious	5.0
More anxious to less anxious	1.4
More anxious to no difference	10.1
Less anxious to no difference	17.3

difference', more students had moved from 'less anxious' to 'more anxious' than the reverse (see Table 5).

To examine the specific phases of the distance learning process – input, processing and output – that were associated with anxiety, a slightly modified version of MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) anxiety measure, as outlined earlier, was used in the June questionnaire. The *input* measure concerns the external material that students encounter. Anxiety may be associated with, for example, listening material where the participants speak rapidly, or written text that may be complex or dense. The *processing* phase involves learning and thinking in the target language. Anxiety can impair cognitive processing on the kinds of tasks that are heavily reliant on memory and poorly organized (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). *Output* anxiety refers to the apprehension experienced when speaking or writing in the target language. All stages are seen to be interdependent. Students were presented with a Likert scale and asked to indicate the strength of their view by ticking the appropriate box (see Appendix B Q6). The results giving the totals of the first two (strongly agree and agree) and last two (strongly disagree and disagree) columns are shown in Tables 6–8.

Table 6
Anxiety associated with language input

Input	% Strongly agree/ agree	% Strongly disagree/ disagree
I enjoy just listening to someone speaking French	77.5	2.8
I am not bothered by someone speaking quickly in French	24.6	54.3
I get flustered unless French is spoken very slowly and deliberately	26.0	48.6
I get upset when French is spoken too quickly	26.7	48.6
It does not bother me if my French notes are disorganized before I study them	16.2	66.2
I get upset when I read in French because I have to read things again and again	5.6	78.8

Table 7
Anxiety associated with language processing

Processing	% Strongly agree/agree	% Strongly disagree/disagree
I constantly feel that if I make more of an effort I will get better results	76.9	9.1
Learning new French vocabulary does not worry me; I can acquire it in no time	18.2	49.0
I am confident in my ability to appreciate the meaning of French dialogues	48.2	21.3
I do not worry when I hear new or unfamiliar words; I am confident that I can understand them	32.9	33.6
I am anxious with French because, no matter how hard I try, I have trouble understanding it	10.5	65.0

Table 8
Anxiety Associated with Language Output

Output	% Strongly agree/agree	% Strongly disagree/disagree
I may know the proper French expressions, but when I am nervous they just will not come out	61.3	19.7
I get upset when I know how to communicate something in French but just cannot verbalize it	48.5	24.6
When I become anxious during a tutorial I cannot remember anything I have studied	32.3	38.3%
I feel confident that I can easily use the French vocabulary that I know in a conversation	39.4	36.6
I never feel tense when I have to speak French	14.0	68.5

While reading and just listening to others speaking French presented very few problems, two thirds (66.2%) were bothered by disorganized written input, in this case notes they had made themselves but had not organized prior to studying them. 'Anxiety-arousal at this stage has an impact on all subsequent stages' (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994, p. 286) and distance learners, obliged to rely to a much greater extent on their own resources, need to be highly organized. This reflects other studies where metacognitive skills such as organisation and time-management have been identified by researchers as being particularly applicable to the distance context (Hurd, 2000; White, 1999, 2003). People speaking fast in French bothered over half the sample (54.3%), but far fewer became flustered (26%) or upset (26.7%) by this. The majority, therefore, while experiencing some apprehension about speed of input, did not get unduly upset by it.

When it came to processing, while 76.9% equated effort with results, nearly half the sample (49%) worried about learning new vocabulary. Fewer experienced anxiety associated with the understanding of new or unfamiliar words (33.6%) and only 10.5% were anxious about understanding French in general. We might speculate from these results that the processing stage did not cause anxiety for the majority of respondents, because they could work at their own pace at times to suit them.

The output stage produced, as anticipated, the highest evidence of anxiety. This ties in with the widely held view that foreign language anxiety is predominantly associated with

the oral aspects of the language, and that fear of speaking in front of others is the single most important source of language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999). 68.5% felt tense when they had to speak in French. Nearly two thirds (61%) could not retrieve known expressions when nervous, and just under half (48%) got upset when they knew how to communicate something in French but could not verbalize it. Nearly a third (32.3%) could not remember what they had learned when feeling anxious in a tutorial and 36.6% did not feel confident that they could easily use the French vocabulary they knew in a conversation.

The qualitative data from open-ended questions provided further evidence overall of the anxiety caused by speaking and the embarrassment of painful self-exposure. The words ‘panic’, ‘fool’, ‘idiot’, ‘embarrassment’, ‘fear’, ‘humiliation’, ‘failure’, ‘mistakes’, ‘confidence’ (lack of) and ‘worries’ frequently occurred in their responses, reflecting the view of Dewaele (2001, p. 153) that ‘language production is particularly vulnerable to high levels of anxiety’ and ‘speaking a foreign language requires courage, lots of it. It is like jumping into the deep end of the pool after having read a manual on swimming techniques’. In this respect the distance context was not different from other learning settings. Murphy’s study of distance language learners (2005, p. 30) gave a similar picture of oral assignments which were found to be ‘nerve-wracking’, as explained by one student: ‘I was just so worried about making a fool of myself, I realize that my difficulties were caused by anxiety and an inability to relax’.

While many of the comments above would support those of classroom-based learners, the distance factor was associated with additional specific anxiety-provoking elements.

4.2.1. *Lack of instant feedback*

‘No tutor on a daily basis to check your learning.’

‘Lack of feedback/praise/constructive comments of encouragement.’

‘Because there isn’t the instant feedback if I’m doing something wrong, and where there’s more than one way of expressing something, I just lack confidence/knowledge and then I’ll leave it unresolved.’

4.2.2. *Difficulty assessing personal progress in comparison with other students*

‘Not aware of others’ level/ability, so difficult to gauge your own progress.’

‘Not knowing, but fearing, I am less able than others on the same course.’

4.2.3. *Isolation*

‘One cannot easily learn a language in isolation – a language is a living organic entity.’

‘I feel isolated.’

4.2.4. *Lack of opportunities for speaking practice*

‘Feel anxious about not speaking enough.’

‘Because I don’t get the opportunity to speak in French with other students, that side of language learning is not being developed – so I feel anxious because I don’t feel I can speak the language.’

4.2.5. *Lack of confidence when working on your own*

I am not sure how long to devote to any one aspect and how to make the information sink in.'

'When you are learning on your own then there is no-one to guide you and help you learn.'

'I have little confidence speaking French so I don't get the chance to build up confidence that I would at a weekly evening class, for example.'

The think-aloud students backed up the comments from the questionnaires with respect to anxiety associated with linguistic aspects – vocabulary and expression, accuracy – and added other anxiety-provoking elements, such as unclear task instructions, the answer key sections (*Corrigés*) and, in one case, the nature of the task itself:

4.2.6. *Task instructions*

'Sometimes I can't quite think what they want me to do for this exercise.'

4.2.7. *Corrigés (answer keys)*

One student suggested that the *Corrigés* were helpful for compensating for inadequate task instructions, because they told you what you were supposed to be doing. Another sometimes found them

'intimidating, when you look at what's given in the suggested answer because my answers are nowhere near as formal or as accurate or as interesting. I think it would be more helpful if you were not made to feel too inadequate about not writing as much as there is in the answers given'.

4.2.8. *Nature of task*

One student described her anxiety about tasks that require you to talk about the past:

'My parents died when I was young, and it's hard for me to talk about that. I can't be the only person who feels that way, but it does sort of add a little extra emotional blanket on to everything when I have to do that ... it makes it sometimes hard to think straight.'

The telephone interviews after the course had ended provided another source of information to triangulate the data from the questionnaires and think-alouds. The 15 students who took part in them had also responded to Questionnaires 1 and 2 and were in a position to give their views based on the whole course. Six of them felt that learning a language at a distance had caused them some anxiety at times. Their explanations supported previous comments made in the open-ended sections of the questionnaires, and centred around lack of direction, the need for self-discipline, isolation and oral performance:

'It's sometimes difficult with all these sorts of courses to know if you are going in the right direction all the time; you could quite easily go on making mistakes and not pick them up, which is a big problem.'

'Not much contact with other students and the tutor; I got a bit worried and anxious about certain things.'

A new anxiety-provoking element related to studying the course was the mention by one interviewee of

‘the complexity of all the technologies where you’ve got a CD player hanging off your ears and trying to run a video, stop, start and all that sort of thing – that’s the only anxiety sense really for me’.

4.3. Elements of the distance language learning process that are associated with non-anxiety

It was evident that while learning at a distance provoked more anxiety for some than learning face-to-face, the reverse was the case for 27% of students after four months of study who claimed that the distance factor actually made them less anxious. Their reasons covered:

- opportunity to work at your own pace and be more in control;
- absence of exposure to public criticism;
- lack of competition and peer pressure;
- chance to practice and make mistakes in private, to reflect and to try things out;
- better option for those with low self-confidence.

Comments included:

‘I feel more in control as I can plan and organize myself.’

‘My mistakes are not laid bare to class criticism.’

‘No fear of speaking publicly.’

‘Nobody around who appears to find it easy or is better.’

‘Having time to listen, read, reflect on my own and try out expressions with the CD.’

‘Distractions are fewer, and practice and repetitive work is more easily carried out in private.’

‘Gives me more confidence.’

In terms of confidence, while some of the learners above felt more confident away from the gaze of tutor and students, others, as indicated earlier, associated lack of guidance and absence of correction with loss of confidence and subsequent anxiety.

The interviewees who said that learning a language at a distance had not caused them any anxiety put this down to various factors:

4.3.1. Age

‘The older you get the more relaxed you are at being on your own and going at your own pace.’

4.3.2. Competence in another language

‘I feel with French that it will also come in the same sort of way, so I’m not too worried that I’m not great shakes yet; I might have felt differently if it was a new language to me.’

4.3.3. *Not having to perform in front of others (other than for the end-of-course assessment)*

'I think that obviously the anxiety isn't there, having to do it in front of others. Certainly the heart beats much faster when you are in the classroom so that bit, the anonymity and the privacy, it gives you for speaking. I found that quite good.'

'I'm quite happy doing things like talking to myself.'

4.3.4. *The fact that they were studying through choice*

'My life is so stressful anyway that things I do voluntarily don't get on the radar screen in terms of worrying about them. I'm anxious about some things but not about something voluntary, no.'

4.4. *Strategies distance language learners deploy to reduce anxiety*

For many learners, language courses are the most anxiety-provoking courses they take and yet what they actually do to cope with anxiety has received very little attention (Kondo and Ying-Ling, 2004). Students in this study were asked in February if they had any ideas for dealing with anxiety. Suggestions involved practising as much as possible and using radio and TV programmes for extra practice. Others included contacting other students; discussing concerns; learning songs; recording yourself and comparing your performance with the course extract; and focusing on the fact that other students probably have similar anxieties. In June, students were asked if they had managed to work out ways of dealing with anxiety that they would recommend to others. A third claimed to have done so and these students were invited to study a list of strategies drawn from other studies (Oxford, 1990; Young, 1999) to indicate firstly all those that applied to them and then to identify which for them was the most important strategy. The results are shown in Table 9 in rank order for all strategies used.

Table 9
Strategies used to cope with anxiety

Strategy	% All	Rank	% Most important	Rank
Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes	87.5	1	41.7	1
Use positive self-talk	64.6	2	37.5	2
Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat	35.4	3	0	7
Use relaxation techniques	29.1	4	6.3	3
Share my worries with other students	20.8	5	4.2	5
Let my tutor know I am anxious	20.8	5	4.2	5
Give myself a reward or treat when I do well	18.8	7	0	7
Be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning	16.7	8	0	7
Tell myself when I speak that it will not take long	14.6	9	0	9
Other	6.3	10	6.3	3
Write down my feelings in a day or notebook	2.08	11	0	7

Taking risks was the strategy used by an overwhelming majority and was also considered the most important. Positive self-talk came next in both categories, followed by imagining you are having an informal chat and use of relaxation techniques, although none considered the informal chat strategy as the most important. Calling on support from tutor or peers was used by around a fifth of students but not considered the most important by many. 6.3% had other strategies they used, among which were ticking completed tasks, reviewing material already covered to see how you have progressed, revision and repetition to build confidence, joining a French self-help group, and outdoor activities like gardening ‘to clear confusion’.

Data from the think-alouds complemented findings from the questionnaires. Strategies included getting something down on paper; concentrating on getting the gist; checking with the answers to ensure you’re on the right track, and keeping going, being persistent:

‘As long as I’ve grasped a bit of each section, I want to keep moving forward, and as you move forward, bits from the back come with you anyway.’

Two of the students taking part in the interviews were fortunate in having access to French speakers, and practised regularly with them. Others referred, as before, to self-encouragement to relieve anxiety:

‘I just kept on saying to myself, as long as you come out of this having learnt something it doesn’t actually matter – so that’s how I sort of calmed myself down a bit.’

Ideas from students to reduce anxiety which were addressed to course writers and tutors included: more frequent tutorials and ‘less putting on the spot’; French native-speaker groups for practice; slowing down the speed of speech on the audio CDs; more reassurance and pre-course guidance. Others suggested that the onus was on the student to deal with anxiety and that it was sometimes practical problems that needed addressing:

‘I think the materials/tutorials are fine – it’s me!’

‘Not a problem with the course – it’s the rest of my life!’

It should be borne in mind, however, that nearly two thirds of those responding to Questionnaire 2 had not worked out any strategies for dealing with anxiety. This could of course be because they did not feel that it was necessary to do so. However, given that just over a fifth of students at each intervention point (23.9%; 21.3%) felt more anxious about learning a language at a distance than in the classroom, the number of those who had not found appropriate strategies is significant. It would be reasonable to speculate that the most anxious students are also the least able to help themselves and that these are the students who could benefit most from guidance in affective strategy development.

5. Discussion and conclusion

A multi-instrument approach with several intervention points enabled valuable data to be gathered on the prevalence of anxiety overall, the elements that related specifically to the distance learning environment, and the strategies students use to combat anxiety. The results indicate that anxiety is an influential factor in language learning at a distance, and thus support findings from classroom-based studies. Anxiety-related problems focused mainly on speaking, in particular when called on to speak in front of others, and fear of not being understood.

However, the picture is not altogether clear in terms of the distance factor effect. While 21% of students overall after four months of study felt that learning at a distance made them more anxious than learning in a classroom, 27% found that the distance factor made them *less* anxious and 51.7% did not consider that the learning mode made any difference. Further analysis revealed that 44.6% of students who completed both questionnaires had a different view of anxiety in a distance language setting after four months of study (see Table 5). These preliminary results indicate that there might be some interesting differences with regard to non-anxiety, which will need to be followed up. The interviews revealed that age, competence in another language, not having to perform in front of others/being able to practice on your own, and the fact that they had chosen to study at a distance, were all factors contributing to a feeling of comfort and the reduction of anxiety. Nonetheless, the drop in numbers overall of those who felt that learning at a distance made them less anxious between February and June (36.6–27%) may also be significant. In other words, in terms of distance reducing anxiety, the reality did not match the expectation.

5.1. Limitations and future directions

The think-aloud verbal protocols and interviews backed up results from the questionnaires but also yielded additional information on both language anxiety and strategies to deal with it. Lack of instant feedback, difficulty assessing personal progress in comparison with other students, isolation, lack of opportunities for speaking practice and lack of confidence when working on your own, were seen as particularly attributable to the distance factor. However, because numbers involved in these qualitative interventions were very small, the results, while adding depth to the quantitative findings, can only be broadly indicative. While it is not unusual for qualitative investigations to be carried out with small samples, future studies might benefit from larger numbers of participants in order to increase the reliability of the results.

Findings from the two questionnaires were compared using the global results in order to determine the nature and extent of learner anxiety overall at the beginning and mid-point of the course. An individual differences approach involving the use of case studies would be a useful extension of this study, in order to track individual student responses through both questionnaires, and build a clearer picture of the ways in which individual students change and develop throughout their course of study. Given that there is considerable evidence of a negative correlation between anxiety and low achievement with face-to-face learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993a,b; Matsuda and Gobel, 2004), the inclusion of achievement measures in future studies with distance language learners would be another fruitful extension of the research.

5.2. Implications for distance language educators

Useful insights were obtained into the ways in which, as distance language providers and teachers, we could do better in terms of reducing anxiety, by reviewing elements of our course materials and improving our support in the affective domain, given its potential to affect how efficiently students can use the skills and assets that they have (Ehrman, 1996). Strategies to combat anxiety need to be complemented by those that foster self-efficacy, which might actually reduce the need for anxiety-reducing strategies (Mills et al., 2006). Spielmann and Radnofsky (1999, p. 259) also focus on the positive, maintaining

that it is the ‘development of an emerging L2 self’ that needs to be consciously fostered in instructional materials and methods. Students at The Open University (UK) are already encouraged to raise their awareness of both themselves as learners and of the language they are learning, and to experiment with different learning strategies (Hurd et al., 2001). *Success with Languages* (Hurd and Murphy, 2005), a set book for beginners and recommended at all levels, also provides a range of suggestions as a solid starting point for supporting the affective side of student learning. Some of the strategies suggested by students themselves could be considered by course writers, for example more reassurance and pre-course guidance from the course team; encouragement to keep in regular touch with the tutor and other students to discuss concerns rather than bottling things up; using songs in the target language to relax while also extending or reinforcing vocabulary or grammar points; addressing the common problem of imagining that you are the only one having difficulties by focusing on the fact that other students probably have similar anxieties. For those not experiencing anxiety because of the protected and private environment that distance learning affords, strategies are needed to help bridge the gap between private practice/rehearsal which can promote comfort and confidence, and public performance which can cause anxiety.

It is also important to realize that the requirement to respect the right of distance adult students to be left alone if that is what they wish, and the fact that some of those suffering language anxiety may well employ a well-known anxiety coping tactic, that of avoidance, mean that inevitably some students will not be reached.

Since this study was carried out, more learning choices have become available and students can now register for their preferred tutorial mode, face-to-face or online, using an audio-graphic interactive conferencing system developed in-house. This facility is now open to all students, whether registered for online tutorials or not, to allow them to communicate with each other in designated ‘discussion rooms’ for mutual support or additional oral language practice. With regard to online learning, there is evidence that the anonymity and collaborative nature of computer-mediated communication can help to reduce anxiety (Hampel et al., 2005; Lamy and Hampel, in press; Kern and Warschauer, 2000; Macdonald, 2003; Roed, 2003), and this may well have implications for distance language learners as online learning opportunities become more established in institutions such as The Open University (UK).

The outcomes of the study enhance our knowledge of the extent and nature of anxiety in distance language learning and the attempts of learners to counteract its negative effects. In so doing, they also provide some useful pointers for course writers and tutors. With regard to the interplay between the various factors at work in language learning, Young (1999) advises language educators to make their number one priority the language learner, and recognize the interdependent role that linguistics, cognition and affect play in language learning. White (2005, p. 177), specifically in relation to distance learning, underlines the importance of understanding the learner’s perspective and developing ‘a more informed understanding of the circumstances of learners, their needs and the ways they respond to distance learning opportunities’. These are important avenues for further research.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the help of Monica Shelley in commenting on the design of the questionnaires and analyzing the questionnaire data.

Appendix A. Learning a language at a distance

Questionnaire 1, February 2003 (questions relating to reasons, beliefs and anxiety)

Q9 Why have you chosen to learn French at a distance? Please cross *all* the boxes that

apply in column (a) and *one* box only in column (b) to indicate which is your most important reason.

	(a) All reasons	(b) Most important reas
Because I need to fit my learning around work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(If you put a cross in this answer, please say whether you work full or part time)		
part time <input type="checkbox"/> full time <input type="checkbox"/>		
Because I need to fit my learning around family commitments.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I prefer to learn on my own.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I prefer to learn at my own pace.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I want to try something different.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I live too far from an educational institution.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because classroom-based language learning has never worked for me...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because it is easier than learning with others.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because it's an interesting challenge.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I learn better this way.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because it is less stressful than learning in a classroom.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I cannot get out of my home easily.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please give details).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q10 Do you anticipate having any problems studying this course?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Anxiety

Q14 Do you feel more anxious about learning a language at a distance than learning in a classroom?

Yes, more anxious.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, less anxious.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, difference between the two.....	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you answered Yes, please say what you think is making you more anxious about learning a language at a distance.

Q15 Do you have any ideas for dealing with anxiety in learning a language at a distance?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If Yes, please give details

Appendix B. Learning a language at a distance

Questionnaire 2, June 2003 (questions relating to anxiety)

Anxiety**Q2a** Have you experienced any problems so far in learning French at a distance?

Yes

☐

No

☐**Q6** To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (*Please cross one box only in each row.*)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am not bothered by someone speaking quickly in French.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It does not bother me if my French notes are disorganized before I study them.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I enjoy just listening to someone speaking French.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I get flustered unless French is spoken very slowly and deliberately.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I get upset when I read in French because I have to read things again and again.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I get upset when French is spoken too quickly.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning new French vocabulary does not worry me; I can acquire it in no time.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am anxious with French, because, no matter how hard I try, I have trouble understanding it.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I constantly feel that if I make more of an effort I will get better results.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I am confident in my ability to appreciate the meaning of French dialogues.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I do not worry when I hear new or unfamiliar words; I am confident that I can understand them.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I never feel tense when I have to speak French.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel confident that I can easily use the French vocabulary that I know in a conversation.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I may know the proper French expressions, but when I am nervous they just won't come out.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I get upset when I know how to communicate something in French but I just cannot verbalize it.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When I become anxious during a tutorial, I cannot remember anything I have studied.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q7a Are you finding learning a language at a distance makes you more or less anxious than learning in a classroom?

More anxious.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Less anxious.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
No difference between the two.....	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q7b If you answered **More anxious**, please say what makes you more anxious about learning a language at a distance.

If you answered **Less anxious**, please say what makes you less anxious.

Q7c Please list any types of tasks, activities or aspects of the course that make you feel anxious.

Q7d Please add anything that you feel could be done to reduce your anxiety in carrying out these tasks and activities, for example in the course materials or tutorials?

Q8a Have you managed to work out ways of dealing with anxiety in learning a language at a distance

that you would recommend to other learners?

Yes
☐

No
☐

Q8b	If you answered Yes, to Q8a please cross all that apply in column (a) and cross the one most important in column (b).	(a) All	(b) Most Import (cross <u>one</u> only)
	Use positive self-talk (e.g. I can do it; it doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others make mistakes).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Tell myself when I speak that it won't take long.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Give myself a reward or treat when I do well.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Write down my feelings in a diary or notebook.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Share my worries with other students.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Let my tutor know that I am anxious.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other (please give details).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix C. Extract from think-aloud instructions (July)

When you get to Activité 11, start your tape recorder and work through Activités 11 and 12. For this part of the task, I would like you to record everything that is going through your mind as you work through each step of the two activities. You should not plan what you are going to say or try to explain what you are saying, but you should keep talking. It is important that you record your thoughts as they come to mind and not after having had time to reflect. You may find it helpful to do a practice run with an earlier activity, just to get used to the idea of talking to yourself!

Appendix D. One-to-one telephone interview questions related to anxiety (December)

From the questionnaires we know that some students have found learning a language at a distance has caused them some anxiety at times. Would you count yourself among them?

(If yes) which aspects of studying the course did you find stressful? What steps did you take to deal with your worries and were you successful in your attempts?

(If no) Could you explain what it is about learning a language at a distance that you have found makes you less anxious?

Did you feel that you got enough support while you were studying the course?

(If yes,) was this down to the way the materials were structured, the feedback from the *Corrigés* and from your tutor, or something else?

(If no), what more do you think could have been done to support you?

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PUBLICATION TWELVE

Hurd, S. (2007b) Distant voices: learners' stories about the affective side of learning a language at a distance. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, Special issue: Listening to Learners' Voices 1 (2), 142-159. ISSN 1750-1229.

Distant Voices: Learners' Stories About the Affective Side of Learning a Language at a Distance

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Learning a language at a distance has its own special challenges. The remoteness of the learning context can mean isolation for the learner, communication difficulties for the teacher and problems of access for the researcher. Yet distance language learners are likely to be no more skilled in self-regulation than classroom learners, and to require high levels of support. Research tools are needed, therefore, which allow them to talk freely about their learning in order to help distance educators target support appropriately. This paper draws on data from two pilot ethnographic studies of distance language learners using think-aloud protocols to access their thought processes as they tackled two designated language tasks. They were carried out as part of a wider study in each case to investigate aspects of affect including beliefs, motivation and anxiety. The audio-taped voices provided rich insights into the advantages and disadvantages, pleasures and frustrations, comforts and anxieties of learning a language at a distance, and the strategies learners use to manage in a distance environment. The studies underlined the importance of listening to students and using their voices as a basis for discussion on improving aspects of the design and delivery of distance language courses.

doi: 10.2167/illt020.0

Keywords: distance language learning, emotions, think-aloud, voices, strategies, learner support

Introduction

The highly complex nature of the structures and systems of languages and the fact that they involve a significant social dimension differentiate them from other subjects (Dörnyei, 2003; Victori, 1992; White, 1994). In the distance context, as Hurd (2005: 143) points out, 'these aspects come into sharper focus, not only because learners are denied the classroom situation where speaking practice, sharing difficulties and giving immediate support can be easily incorporated into lessons, but also because of the inherently non-social nature of this mode of learning, which militates against the interdependence that many language experts would consider fundamental to successful language learning'. While affective learner variables such as emotions and feelings, attitudes, tolerance of ambiguity, anxiety and motivation need to be taken into account in the planning of any programme, the affective dimensions of language learning may be particularly significant for distance learners, in that they need to manage their own feelings in order to

1750-1229/07/02 242-18 \$20.00/0
Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching

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Vol. 1, No. 2, 2007

compensate for the physical absence of a teacher and peers (Harris, 2003; Hauck & Hurd, 2005; White, 2003). Support for the learner is therefore of paramount importance. The Open University (UK) promotes supported open and distance learning, and learner support, as an integral part of all its courses, both print-based (strategy development throughout the course materials, study charts, course guides, transcripts) and person-based (student services, personal tutor, self-help groups). The teacher's voice is ever-present in the course materials, the tutor's voice is heard in feedback on assignments and students can have a voice, if they wish, at face-to-face or online tutorials during their course.

The rapid advances in technology are enabling much higher levels of contact than ever before, anywhere and at any time. Since the beginning of 2006, all language students have had access to *Lyceum*, an in-house developed audiographic conferencing system which allows them the possibility of contacting their peers online at mutually convenient times. However, although students' voices in virtual and face-to-face contexts can tell us something about their language learning, they may not be the full story, nor may we be accessing the voices of all who need to be heard. Determining the nature and intensity of support needed is no easy task, given the lack of proximity of learners to tutors, to researchers and to each other. The relevance of think-aloud protocols (TAPs) to the distance language context remains underexplored, and yet it is arguably this group of learners for whom such a method might have particular application, given its potential to 'tap' processes that are normally hidden, among learners that are hard to reach.

The first small-scale pilot study using TAPs was carried out in 2003–04 with four learners studying the lower-intermediate level French course *Ouverture*, the lowest level course available from The Open University (UK) at the time. It was conducted as part of a longitudinal study using questionnaires and interviews to investigate the distance language learner experience, including learner perceptions of personality, motivation, anxiety and non-anxiety, roles and approaches (Hurd, 2006, 2007). Results from the TAPs strand indicated the strong potential of this research tool to yield important data on distance language learners, and prompted the second study with a larger sample (12) as soon as the French Beginners course *Bon départ* came on stream in 2004–05. This was also part of a main study which focused on motivation. Both pilots used TAPs to chart the cognitive and affective processes of students working through two designated language tasks from their respective course books. The findings were intended to be exploratory and not conclusive, and to enhance the quantitative results obtained in the main study in each case from questionnaires ($N = 500$; $N = 815$), by adding the actual voices of a small number of learners. Both were relatively small-scale and piloting a tool virtually unused in distance language learning. A further dimension of the two pilots, then, was to learn lessons that might influence future more substantial TAPs studies with learners in the early stages of language study at a distance.

Affect in a Distance Context

While research into affect in the classroom has attracted much interest in the research community, there is little that focuses on the distance language learning context, whether face-to-face or online. Affect is increasingly seen to have a very influential role in the learning process, in that it has the power to impede or interfere with learning in substantial ways. Hayes' (1996) model of the writing process integrates affect, in particular motivation, with cognitive processes. Arnold and Brown (1999: 6) contend that: 'The way we feel about ourselves and our capabilities can either facilitate or impede our learning ...'. Ehrman (1996: 138) focuses in particular on the influence of motivation and anxiety on learning: 'The affective dimension affects how efficiently students can use what they have. For example, strong motivation tends to help students marshal their assets and skills, whereas low motivation or intense anxiety interferes with their ability to use their skills and abilities.'

Affective factors have an impact on all learning, but may be particularly significant for language learning at a distance because of the mismatch between an inherently *social* discipline such as languages and a learning context which is characterised by *remoteness*, and because of the specific features of languages which make them more difficult to learn at a distance than other disciplines. On the other hand, there is evidence that the privacy of the distance setting allows some language learners to feel less anxious (Hurd, 2007), and that computer-mediated communication can also help to reduce anxiety and maintain motivation (Hampel *et al.*, 2005; Hauck & Hurd, 2005; Thorpe, 2002).

The difficulty of investigating affective issues at a distance prompted the search for a research tool that would be appropriate and effective for the distance language learning context: appropriate in the sense that students would not find it intrusive and would be able to use it in private in their own way and in their own time; effective in that it might yield detailed data that could not be obtained through other means. TAPs seemed to fit the bill.

Using Think-aloud Protocols

Borrowed from cognitive psychology, TAPs have been extensively used in the language classroom to investigate learners' thought processes as they perform reading, writing, listening, speaking or translation activities (Anderson & Vandergrift, 1996; Bernardini, 1999, 2001; Block, 1986; Cohen, 1996; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Gascoigne, 2002; Levine & Reves, 1998; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Roca de Larios *et al.*, 2006; Salataci & Akyel, 2002; Witte & Cherry, 1994). TAPs have also been used widely in distance learning and increasingly in web-based learning environments (Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Ruhleder & Twidale, 2000; Young, 2005). However, apart from an investigation into autonomy in distance English learning (Vanijdee, 2003) using TAPs, no studies have been found which use this research tool to investigate affect in a distance language learning context.

The theoretical framework for TAPs, largely attributed to Newell and Simon (1972) and Ericsson and Simon (1984, 1993), is based on the principles of

information processing theory. According to this model, verbal reports restricted to 'heeded' information, i.e. the information that is present in *short-term memory* and *concurrent with actual thinking*, have the potential to reveal in considerable detail the information students are attending to *while performing their tasks*, as well as the strategies they employ. Since the thoughts are concurrent rather than retrospective, they are considered to be more authentic and less structured than the results obtained from questionnaires, and also less subject to 'embellishment or decay of information' (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Another major advantage is their human quality, in that they give the data, in Smagorinsky's (1994) words, 'a unique soul', deepening our understanding of human cognitive processing. Finally, they are said to have the potential to yield information on context and strategy use, in addition to cognitive and affective processes (Afflerbach, 2000).

TAPs as a research method is not, however, without its critics. A frequently cited potential problem is automaticity, the fact that we may be unaware of our cognitive processes as many are automatic (Singhal, 2001). The issue of reactivity, i.e. the effect of thinking aloud on participants' internal processes, also concerns some researchers (Matsumoto, 1993; Nielson *et al.*, 2002) who signal the interference that can be caused by the 'heavy' or 'double' cognitive load under which students are placed in having to keep talking at the same time as carrying out the task.

In response to the automaticity criticism, Ericsson and Simon (1980) point out that as processes become more automated and hence unconscious, only the final products are left in memory available for reporting. They suggest that researchers should select tasks that are complex and difficult for the learner as these are less likely to involve processes that are engaged in automatically; a relatively straightforward endeavour for the demanding task of language learning. With regard to reactivity, Leow and Morgan-Short (2004: 42) confirm the view of Ericsson and Simon (1993) that there is no evidence in TAPs studies that internal processes are altered. They conclude from their study that 'the only evidence of reactivity in studies to date is the amount of time required to complete the task'.

One of the problems with TAPs is the difficulty in practice of isolating what is concurrent thinking from what is retrospective. Cohen (1996) separates verbal reports into self-report (reports of general behaviour), self-observation (introspective or retrospective reports of generalised language behaviour) and self-revelation (think-aloud stream-of-consciousness disclosure of thought processes). Graham (1997: 43), however, finds no clear-cut distinction between thinking aloud, introspection and retrospection: 'The difficulty with all of these various categories is their tendency to overlap.' This study made use of a version of TAPs which accesses data on learner discourse about emotions and metacognitive awareness, as well as providing evidence of emotional responses concurrent with task performance.

Despite possible methodological weaknesses, TAPs have a major advantage in that they can reveal insights which are difficult or even impossible to obtain by other methods. It is important, however, to recognise that most investigations are exploratory and need to be supplemented by data from other research (Smagorinsky, 1994).

To sum up, then, the reasons for choosing TAPs for these pilot studies were:

- they would allow direct access to distance students' mental processes;
- they had the potential to yield information on more than just cognitive activity (for example: affect, context, strategy use);
- they could be carried out by individual students in private in an environment of their choice; and
- the unmediated data might usefully add to our understanding of the ways in which distance language learners approach and work through language tasks.

The Studies

Research questions

The following research questions were addressed in the studies:

- (1) What emotions, both positive and negative, do distance language learners experience as they work through tasks?
- (2) How aware are learners (a) of themselves as learners (b) of the context of their learning?
- (3) What strategies do distance language learners use to manage their emotions as they tackle tasks on their own?

Participants

For the first study with lower-intermediate level learners, the sample contained four women between the ages of 40 and 60. The older two had a first degree or equivalent professional qualification, while those in their 40s had acquired basic qualifications from school in four or five subjects. A large amount of data was gathered and important lessons were learned which prompted a second pilot with a more representative sample: nine women and three men. For the purposes of this paper I examine the protocols of the three men and three of the women, selected to include as wide a range of demographic variables as possible. Out of the six subjects: two (one man and one woman) had no previous knowledge of French. The age span covered 50 years: the youngest student was female (28) and the oldest was male (78). None had any experience of learning a language in distance mode. The participants in this study were enrolled on *Bon départ*, Part 1 of the Certificate in French, and the four students in the first study were following *Ouverture*, Part 2. Both courses contain course books with related audio material, transcripts, a study chart and a course guide. Tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) are marked by the tutor to whom each student is assigned, and students can also attend tutorials face-to-face or online and day schools in their region if they wish.

Procedure and methods

The participants in the first study were volunteers who responded to a request to take part in a new piece of research. In the second study, they were randomly selected by The Open University's Institute for Educational

Technology from those in the main project who were following the beginners' course and who had agreed to take part in additional studies during the year. All were contacted by e-mail and given details of the project. The tasks were chosen in each case from the course book students would be starting in each case at the time the TAPs were scheduled to take place. Fuller information was provided in a follow-up letter including instructions to students to verbalise all their thoughts while carrying out their tasks as set out below:

We would like you to record everything that is going through your mind *as you work through each step of the two activities*. You should not plan what you are going to say or try to explain what you are saying, but you should keep talking. It is important that you record your thoughts *as they come to mind and not after having had time to reflect*.

Participants were also encouraged to do a practice run with an earlier activity, just to get used to the idea of talking aloud on their own and to contact the researchers if they had any queries or needed any help. None did. These were mature learners, which might explain why their recordings showed no evidence of difficulty in understanding the instructions or articulating their thoughts. An assurance was also given that all information was confidential and that personal details would not be linked in any way with published results.

Data Analysis

The audiocassettes were transcribed, with emotive reactions indicated in parenthesis, for example [*sighs*], [*laughs*], [*groans*]. As Afflerbach (2000: 174) points out: 'It is difficult to transcribe verbal protocols ... without encountering affect and motivation, which are evinced by readers' exclamations, expletives, grunts, groans and affirmations ...'.

The first stage involved segmenting the transcripts according to the 'thought units' expressed, then re-segmenting as new strands emerged during the process, and finally coding each segment. Coding categories used by other think-aloud studies were consulted in the first instance and helped in the initial stages. The coding process was informed by three paradigms – affective factors, metacognitive knowledge (of self and context) and strategies – but data-driven, in conformity with Bracewell and Breuleux's view (1994: 56) that 'coding categories arise largely in an ad hoc manner from consideration of the protocol, rather than from a rational analysis of the processes required for the task'. Intercoder reliability was initially established at 72.4% for the second study. The coding scheme was then reviewed, agreed changes were implemented and the coding process was repeated in both studies to ensure greater reliability and consistency.

QSR N6 was employed as an appropriate ethnographic tool to facilitate qualitative analysis. This entailed a continuous process of interrogation and interpretation of the data in accordance with affective themes and their related components. The process reflected the view of Manchon *et al.* (2005: 203) that

'working with protocol data involves a compromise between your original aims and your gradual construction of a model from the data'.

Coding activity constantly reinforced the interplay between the cognitive, and affective, a point made by Arnold and Brown (1999: 16) who underline the 'difficulty of isolating the cognitive, for at many points affect inevitably enters the picture'. Several instances of these interrelationships were to be found in the protocols in these studies where, for example, an emotion (anxiety) might trigger a cognitive strategy (re-reading the text or checking the answer).

The software enabled each transcript to be coded to tree-nodes (main categories) and sub-nodes (subcategories), both of which could be modified at any time during the coding process. After many iterations, 10 tree nodes were created. The creation of sub-nodes allowed for fine-grain distinctions to be made within the tree nodes, for example positive emotions included items such as pleasure, satisfaction, relief, laughter and excitement. Negative emotions covered frustration, boredom, disappointment, anticipated and actual difficulty, uncertainty, confusion and embarrassment (see Figure 1).

QSR N6, in particular the 'node browser', enabled access to the utterances from *all* participants that were coded to any particular node or sub-node, e.g. a positive emotion such as pleasure, or a negative one such as frustration, or a particular strategy. The report function showed the overall coding of each individual transcript (see Figure 2).

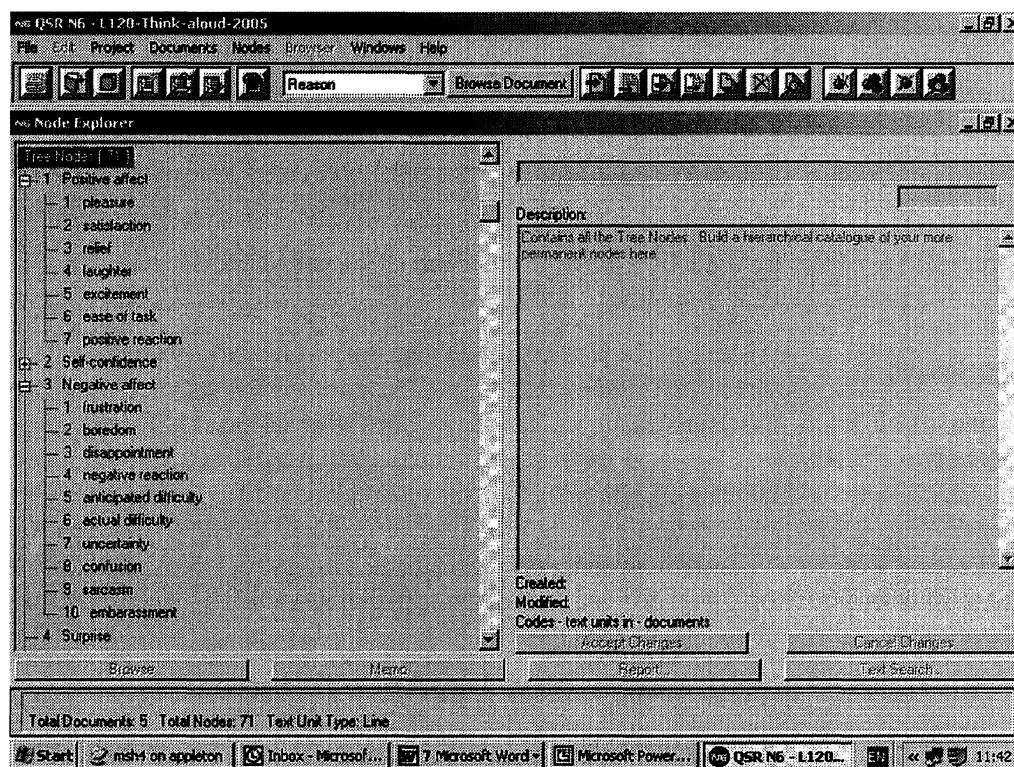


Figure 1 Tree-nodes 'positive affect' and 'negative affect' and their sub-nodes

(1 1)	/Positive affect/pleasure
++ Units:	119-121 151-155 171-175 224-228
(1 2)	/Positive affect/satisfaction
++ Units:	81-83 230-233 263-263
(1 4)	/Positive affect/laughter
++ Units:	53-53
(1 6)	/Positive affect/ease of task
++ Units:	41-41
(2 1)	/Self-confidence/decisive
++ Units:	16-18 39-39 75-77 196-196
(2 2)	/Self-confidence/clear plan of action
++ Units:	11-12 23-24 47-48 156-159 215-219
(2 3)	/Self-confidence/positive global assessment
++ Units:	19-20
(3 3)	/Negative affect/disappointment
++ Units:	239-240
(3 6)	/Negative affect/actual difficulty
++ Units:	67-68 128-129 200-202
(4)	/Surprise
++ Units:	81-81

Figure 2 An extract from a QSR N6 'report' on one of the coded transcripts

Findings

The data from the transcripts of the four students in Study 1 was very extensive – 12,469 words – and from the six participants in Study 2, even more so – 21,834 words. Findings are selected, therefore, according to the ways in which they illuminate understanding of affective factors, levels of awareness, and strategies, as evidenced by the two groups of students. I was concerned more at this point of the study with the overall picture than with individual differences.

Positive and negative emotions

In Study 1, pleasure was expressed at particular French words like *conseils*. The Collins Robert dictionary was described as 'absolutely wonderful' by one

student, and another loved the way the Larousse dictionary explained the meaning of words. There were examples of a relaxed attitude: 'Now then I am going to use *en*. Where do I put it? [laughs] 'Cos there are a few *ens* in there!' Items in activities that could be associated with friends or family were also popular. In Study 2 with beginners, one student came over as particularly relaxed and confident, although he was in the minority. His transcript was peppered with comments like 'yeah got that'; 'yeah fine'; 'OK good'; 'I'm happy with that'. There were also many favourable comments from beginner students about the course materials, including the language learning tips, grammar boxes, *Corrigés* (answer keys and feedback), instructions for activities and cultural information sections, and examples of beginners talking positively about certain types of activities such as gapfill and translation which they found motivating and confidence building.

On the negative side, difficulty, uncertainty, frustration and confusion were very prevalent emotions. The protocols from the two youngest beginner female students in Study 2 contained many pauses, and were full of 'ums and ahs' and words and phrases such as 'scary', 'confused', 'annoying' and 'struggling'. There were also instances of tentativeness and uncertainty from one of the men: 'I suppose', 'I think', 'I don't know', 'I'm never sure', 'it's probably ...'. The writing task caused particular frustration for students in both studies: 'Oh nooo... that's a whole essay! 150 words, that's bloomin' long, of a memory from your childhood [groans]'; 'It's very slow ... that's why I don't like doing it, I think, 'cos it's too stop-start ... look a word up, look up this, go back, look up that ...' (Study 1). 'Doing something from scratch that isn't going to be marked, I just find very frustrating, so I'm not going to do it' (Study 2).

It was also the writing task that caused the most anxiety:

I always get terribly worried about accuracy. I know that a language is really about communication. I understand that, but I always worry that I am not being accurate in how I put things down, so that is one of my concerns. (Study 1)

One student in Study 1 expressed feelings of inadequacy when faced with sample answers to open-ended writing tasks:

When they are not precise answers, it can be a little bit intimidating because you look at what's given in the suggested answer and my answers are nowhere near as formal or as accurate or as interesting. It's useful to have them but I don't know, I think it would be helpful maybe if you sort of were not made to feel too inadequate about not writing as much as there is in the answers given.

Interestingly, the fewest instances of negative affect came from the two beginners who had no previous knowledge of French. It is possible that they felt less pressure than the students who had studied French at school, albeit many years ago, because they had no preconceptions about their French proficiency.

Awareness of self, strategies and the distance learning context

There was evidence of self-awareness at both beginner and lower-intermediate level. Students reflected on themselves as distance language learners in relation to both self and strategies, which sometimes overlapped:

Self: I never know whether it's me remembering it wrong with these answers, but sometimes I seem to get it. I do have trouble sometimes quite getting exactly what's wanted, not in terms of the words 'cos I know it doesn't matter if they're not exactly the same words, but the gist of what they want in the answer... As long as I'm doing, learning what I need to learn, I don't think it matters too much. (Study 1)

In Study 2, the most aware was the 28-year-old female who commented on how much she felt she learned from doing things herself:

I think I learnt a lot more there by trying to do it myself and learning from my mistakes, because I would have just copied those out into the right places and that would have been it and I would have done it in two minutes, and that's fine. But I think I learnt a lot more there trying to do it myself.

Statements from two of the male beginners were few and brief: 'When I leave a section, it has to be complete ... I'm the sort of person who likes to be at the airport three hours before the plane goes'; 'I know what my weaknesses are and I really need to work on them'.

Strategic thinking was evident among the students in both studies, and where this concerned using the dictionary or consulting the *Corrigés*, it was sometimes accompanied by feelings of guilt:

Strategies: Right, try not to use the dictionary too much, but I do when I'm writing things, I find that I do, 'cos occasionally I have mental blocks, can't remember a single word... (Study 1)

I sometimes look at the *Corrigés* to see what I am supposed to do, and then it's like cheating – you've looked at the answers first, then you find there's no point in doing it again 'cos you know what it is now. (Study 1)

I have set myself a sort of strict timetable as to when I study and I have got the course timetable and I've followed that strictly and I always set aside... what I try and do is get as much done over the weekend and at the beginning of the week. (Study 2)

I'm learning better to prioritise. ... What it means as well is that sometimes I take my ... if I do find that I'm getting a little bit behind, I haven't worked over the weekend or something, then I'll take my books and CDs into work and I'll work over my lunch hour, do work at my desk. Spend my lunch hour doing it, which is good because it means I don't have to go to the gym! It's a good excuse! (Study 2)

In the main study with lower-intermediate learners studying *Ouverture*, lack of instant feedback, difficulty assessing personal progress in comparison with other students, isolation, lack of opportunities for speaking practice and lack

of confidence when working on your own were seen as particularly attributable to the distance factor. However, there were also many advantages cited, including the opportunity to work at your own pace and be more in control, the absence of exposure to public criticism, the lack of competition and peer pressure, and the chance to practise and make mistakes in private, to reflect and to try things out. Some of these views were expanded in the TAPs protocols:

Distance language learning: That's one advantage of remote teaching and remote studying ... no-one knows what you actually put, not even your tutor. (Study 1)

... the good thing about doing these sorts of essays ... I can practise, I can write rubbish and I know no one is going to mark it ... but then do I really gain anything from that? (Study 1)

This is part of the problem of working remotely: by the time I see anybody, I'll have forgotten it. (Study 1)

The speaking bit is the tricky bit on distance learning, obviously. (Study 2)

The difficulty with this, being distance learning of course, is that if I check the, erm, the section at the back *Corrigés*, it's going to be something completely different, which is going to be useful to look at but obviously I'm not really going to know if what I've written is correct, because there's nobody to check it through, and I'm reasonably happy with it. (Study 2)

Students in both studies expressed their feelings about their own performance, which also often helped illuminate their emotional state. Aoki (1999: 153) makes the link between emotions and self-evaluation in asserting that 'students often refer to the feelings and emotions that they have experienced in learning, as criteria for their self-evaluation'. Positive self-evaluations in Study 1 included statements such as: 'Getting the pronoun *en* – I got the hang of that in the end'; and 'Yeah, I've covered all the stuff and certainly I know how to use all the ... using *en*, using *de* and all those sorts of things'. In Study 2, the beginner students generally experienced more problems, went into great detail and often tempered their successes with negative comments:

I think I've got the hang of the *il y a* – I'm just getting a bit confused with the others. I'll just check those. Right Activity 44: *j'ai quitté Edimbourg* – oh I missed the accent off, but I'm still quite impressed with that – *il y a vingt ans*. [pause] Spelt twenty wrong – that's not very good is it; done that right the way through. Er à l'université *j'ai étudié l'espagnol pendant quatre ans et le portugais pendant deux ans* – brilliant! *J'ai travaillé à partir de l'âge de vingt ans* – spelt it wrong again [pause] *et j'ai arrêté il y a deux ans*. Yeah I'm quite pleased with that!

Where negative self-evaluations were made, in Study 1 students were often hard on themselves and took personal blame for not understanding or underperforming, rather than attributing this to the type of activity, the time

allowed, the clarity of explanation or any other factor. Examples were: 'I don't want to recite my essay on this tape because I feel embarrassed, it's so bad!' 'Yeah, I just really misunderstood that completely.' The protocols were more mixed for the beginners in Study 2. Some blamed themselves: 'I missed out 1980. My attention must have gone at that point'; 'I don't know why I don't need the *eu* but I keep getting that wrong'.

They came to France – I said: *Ils sont venus à la France [pause] en France* – oh [disappointed] oh yeah of course, feminine countries take *en*. I should have remembered that because that came up in one of my TMAs.

Others were less reticent about apportioning blame elsewhere:

OK so, I found that very hard, erm, and I just, I don't know, I felt as though I could have done with a bit more guidance, erm, and pointers to revision exercises before, erm, tackling that exercise.

Strategy use

The link between affect and cognition with regard to strategies is reinforced by Flading (cited in Nielson *et al.*, 2002), who maintains that emotions are interior signals, and function as a guide for actions and cognition. They are therefore central to the way in which students approach what they are doing, and this was evident from the use of strategies in both studies. In Study 1, all students at lower-intermediate level used some strategies to cope with their emotions, although frequency of use was low. The strategies selected for report were those employed as a response to negative emotion such as anxiety or frustration, and these strategies often involved cognitive or metacognitive processes. Those noted included using positive self-talk, skipping bits of text, re-reading text, keeping going regardless, consulting the *Corrigés*, not dwelling on problems, taking a break, reflecting on possibilities, taking notes to combat anxiety caused by memory lapses, and checking back for reassurance. The two examples which follow are further evidence of the inseparability of affect and cognition. In these two cases affect (anxiety; lack of confidence) provoked a cognitive strategy (consulting the answer key; stopping the activity). They also indicated a degree of metacognitive knowledge, as defined by Wenden (2001), including person knowledge (awareness of self in the learning process), task knowledge (awareness of the nature and demands of a task) and strategic knowledge (choice of strategy):

Sometimes when I'm not sure or anxious, I have given in to the temptation to look at the *Corrigés* there and then, because otherwise I'm going to waste my time ... so if I'm really unhappy and unsure, I do sometimes do that.

You see, these are the bits that I don't mind doing, but I sometimes find if my mindset is not right on the day, I have to just stop and leave it, because it's thinking of something to write about that I have the trouble with, rather than anything else.

There were also instances in Study 2, which illustrated the close relationship between affect and cognition:

When I'm feeling a bit insecure about the answer, I quite often check it straight away.

I'm not going to do this now because I feel quite tired and it's, erm, this exercise looks quite scary, erm, so I think I might tackle it when I feel a bit fresher.

I'm just wondering if I'm doing this right actually, erm, I think I am because it's just *être* and if it was *avoir*, then it would be *avant* and *avait* and it's not, so I think this is OK. Erm ... Right OK, erm, so I think I've finished, I'm a bit confused actually about the difference, so I'm just going to check.

The expectation ... is you have to do it yourself, and I'm not sure how many people struggle with that. Me, I've got 50 cards all with irregular verbs written on them, fully conjugated with the past participles and future stems, and I learn them religiously. It's the only way they stick in my head, OK, but well everybody's got their little ways.

The students responded well to the TAPs and no adverse comments were received on any part of the procedure. One lower-intermediate student in Study 1 even remarked on the positive benefits to her personally of taking part in the study, which lends support for the idea that TAPs can also be an important learning tool, particularly for distance learners who need to rely more heavily on their own resources than classroom learners:

I think in a way doing this project has concentrated me and focused me on my own study skills and made me think about what I should be doing and not doing, so thank you.

Discussion and Conclusion

These two pilot ethnographic studies aimed to give some preliminary insights into affect in the distance context and suggest a way of developing a better understanding of this particular learning culture. Although small-scale, the findings showed the potential of TAPs to 'get at' what students really think and feel when they are tackling a language task.

The student profile that emerged showed high levels of commitment to study, and in most cases good levels of self-awareness. Students were asked to record their thoughts 'as they come to mind and not after having had time to reflect'. However, they did offer their reflections, which were generally prompted by some aspect of the activity they were tackling and often indicated the feelings and emotions they were experiencing. At this point, they were, strictly speaking, engaged in self-observation, introspectively or retrospectively, as defined by Cohen (1996). However, the findings resonated with those of Graham's (1997) study in which she found that students' think-aloud comments 'suggest that they might be engaged in different kinds of self-report

while completing one task; they might begin by simply externalizing thoughts going through their head, then make inferences about the processes involved and finally make an observation which would suggest an element of looking back on what they had done. The comments were probably thus an amalgam of thinking aloud, introspection proper and retrospection after a few seconds.'

The strategies used to deal with managing emotions were relatively few in terms of frequency of occurrence. Moreover, they did not include many that are normally classified as affective (Oxford, 1990), such as anxiety reduction (relaxation and deep breathing exercises), self-encouragement (positive self-talk, rewards) and monitoring emotions (using checklists, discussing feelings). The lack of affective strategies was very notable at these lower levels of learning and reflects Oxford's (1990: 143) view that affective strategies, although crucial to learning success, are 'woefully underused'.

Patterns of strategy use varied, and there were strong indications that more was needed to help students develop the capacity for self-regulation in a distance language learning context. The protocols provided a valuable starting point for a reappraisal of certain aspects of distance language courses, for example:

Clarity of instructions: avoiding language open to varying interpretations e.g. the word 'brief'.

Feedback: re-stating where necessary, and giving encouragement and reassurance where language points are particularly complex.

Open-ended tasks: embedding the 'model' or 'sample' answer in a more supportive structure.

Scaffolding: better staged and guided preparation tasks, particularly at beginner level.

Learner support: taking more account of the full range of personality characteristics; anticipating sensitivities and offering strategies that are practical and appropriate for adult learners.

Limitations and future directions

The size of the samples could be seen as a limitation, and is an issue that will be addressed in future TAP studies, although it is not unusual for TAP studies to include small numbers. Moreover, these were pilot studies using a research tool virtually untried with distance language learners, and an important dimension of the study was to learn lessons from the experience which could inform future, more extensive TAP studies.

Any account of learners' thoughts and emotions is bound to be incomplete. As Hayes and Nash (1996: 45) tell us: 'People cannot articulate everything that crosses their minds'. Moreover, not everyone is comfortable with such self-exposure. We also cannot be absolutely certain that what learners say accurately reflects the emotions they are experiencing. Granger (2004: 90) warns that any discourse from students 'can only ever paint a partial picture' and that 'the study of affect is a speculative art'. The 'sighs', 'laughs and 'groans' gave an indication of how students in this study felt, but future studies should take more account of changes in tone and 'pausal data' (Hayes & Nash, 1996: 46), both of which can also be strong indicators of emotional

states. Gillette (1987: 269), however, makes the point that, although the use of introspective data in language learning cannot offer outcomes that can be measured with certainty, they can 'reveal aspects of language learning previously inaccessible to investigation'. She adds: 'Moreover, such qualitative research is invaluable if our goal is to consider the individual learner as a whole person, not just a hypothetical entity in an anonymous language-learning process.'

Other positive outcomes from the pilot studies were the use of QSR N6, which emerged as a very appropriate ethnographic tool for organising such large data sets and making it possible to 'home in' on particular aspects. The fact that these students were operating entirely on their own with no built-in constraints may also have had a liberating effect, allowing them to express themselves more freely and openly than if they had been observed.

A valuable extension to the project would be a comparison between distance learners and other adult learners to confirm or disconfirm the widely held view among distance language researchers (C. Harris, 1995; V. Harris, 2003; Hurd, 2006; White, 2003) that the affective dimensions of language learning may be particularly significant for distance learners. Future directions with larger samples might also include intervention studies involving additional materials and the use of a control group; explorations of individual difference and its possible effects on learning at a distance; and the use of post-TAPs stimulus recall methods to probe further and/or clarify the thoughts expressed, which can improve the validity of TAPs as a research instrument.

Contemporary researchers in applied linguistics continue to call for 'more empirical studies and different kinds of investigation' that could 'reveal useful insights into how students learn' (Elkhahaifi, 2005: 216). Knowledge of the process of learning a language at a distance is crucial if we are to design courses that truly meet the needs of our students, and we can achieve this best by listening to their stories. Protocol analysis is acknowledged as both messy and time-consuming (Green & Gilhooly, 1996; Oxford, 1993; Smagorinsky, 1994). Nevertheless, as Young (2005: 31) states:

For any researcher who develops an understanding of when thinking aloud is appropriate and carefully considers the activity used to elicit such verbal data, the rewards will certainly be evident through the enhanced data which the student voice provides.

For distance language learning, the data coming 'direct from the source' constitute a valuable resource which can illuminate our understanding about the experience of being a distance language learner and help shape future provision in line with the needs of learners.

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